

Encounters with Freedom

It happened swiftly, without warning, with a suddenness never before experienced in Church history. An ecumenical council was summoned, with no one calling for it, with no crisis on the horizon and without much of an agenda other than "updating." Yet there are those who claim it was the best of all councils.

Vatican II was the first ecumenical council to break away entirely from the juridical model used by the Senate of the Roman Empire. It jettisoned rigid legal categories and focused on being pastoral, practical, personal.

This Council changed our lives in almost every level imaginable. If you and I are to be named or identified, it must be done in terms of the Second Vatican Council.

Let us explore together two themes:

- The Magnitude of Vatican II
- Surviving Retrenchment

1. The Magnitude of Vatican II

I would like to begin with a look at three time periods.

The first of these is in the first century of our era. The event is the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The immediate effects of this on Judaism are fourfold:

- The priesthood is eliminated
Judaism shifts to teaching, pastoral care, family ritual, collective memory and finds it does quite well without a priesthood.
- There is no sacrifice
- There is no Temple or High Priest
An entire centralizing substantial structure is gone.
- The Hebrew Bible becomes central
The Bible is now the heritage, less of Scribes and scholars and more of the people.

The second of these time periods is the Reformation. The event is akin to a Christian destruction of the Temple. The immediate effect on Reformed Christianity is fourfold:

- The priesthood is eliminated
Reformed Christianity shifts to teaching and pastoral care and finds it does quite well without a priesthood

- There is no sacrifice
The sacrifice of the Mass becomes a Communion Service around a table of fellowship.
- There is no Vatican Temple or Pope as High Priest
An entire centralizing substantial structure is gone.
- The New Testament becomes central
Universal accessibility of the Gospel through the vernacular focuses on the Bible as the heritage of God's People.

The third of these time periods is Vatican II. Catholicism moves, less radically but clearly, in the direction of Judaism and the Reformation.

- The priesthood is less necessary
There is a shift to teaching and pastoral care by people at large and even their active presence in liturgical ritual.
- The Eucharist is less seen as a sacrifice
It is more often defined as a sacrament, a community celebration, done in memory of Christ.
- The Vatican and the Papacy become less obligatory
These centralizing structures become less infallible, so to speak, less necessary for Catholics who define themselves as Catholics even as they reject Vatican direction and papal teaching.
- The New Testament becomes central
Catholics find the New Testament more crucial than official Church teaching or an infallible magisterium; indeed all ecclesial policy lacks credibility unless it can be normed by the Gospel.

Vatican II ushered in the Third Millennium.

The First Millennium told us to listen to Christ

The community was resilient and change was in the air. Gentiles, a written Gospel, a sacramental system, monasticism, ecumenical councils, the papacy were all put in place.

The Second Millennium asked us to listen to Church officers

From Gregory VII claiming the pope answers only to God to Vatican I and papal infallibility, Catholicism made Church teaching central. Not change but fracture is in the air: the Orthodox leave in the eleventh century; the Council of Constance moves against those popes in the fifteenth century; the Reformers break away in the sixteenth; papal infallibility in the nineteenth century makes the structure more rigid and isolates it from the modern world.

The Third Millennium invites us to listen to the Spirit

The least juridical of councils is convened as a new Pentecost for the Church; the Spirit is everywhere as Catholics hear the once unknown languages of the world, the other religions, the alternative Christian Churches and the way people speak and believe when they are not formal administrators of the Church.

What did the Council do?

I was at St. Paul's the day John XXIII announced Vatican II on January 25, 1959. I did not know it then but a year before ordination to the priesthood my life had been changed irreversibly.

A Council had been called. The city of Rome was filled with shock, surprise and suspense. The Council had no agenda. It was all very amorphous. The vaguest agenda had been cited. This vagueness made creativity possible. So the Council moved into poetry rather than prose, spirituality rather than doctrine. It would not be militantly against adversaries. It would be on the side of God's People. It would listen to the Spirit.

The Council created 16 documents (seven of them were pivotal). These seven, I maintain, would resist the forces of retrenchment and would also prove relevant to young people who were influenced by them in ways of which they were not aware.

Seven documents went right to the heart of the Church and opened up the future in a remarkable manner.

What are these seven documents?

- Four were Constitutions (Liturgy, Church, Revelation, the Modern World)
- One was a Decree (Ecumenism)
- Two were Declarations (World Religions; Religious Freedom)

I shall synthesize the charge that came from these seven documents in five themes.

1. Change the Liturgy (Liturgy Constitution)

The Council moved the Liturgy from Rome (Latin) to our own culture (vernacular). It moved it from the priest (Latin, back to people, communion rail, no touching of chalice or bread, silent congregations, obligatory attendance) to the people (who plan and participate, respond and sing, take communion into their hands, read and minister communion to others). All this has held. Non-ordained, baptized Christians lead Sunday communion services. And some reform Catholics do not hesitate to celebrate Eucharist with no ordained priest presiding.

We may disagree with the Vatican about rubrics or translations but we feel free to dissent now because we sense the Liturgy is ours and not only theirs. The conflict shows the Council took. Liturgy has been irreversibly reinterpreted.

2. Change the Church (Lumen Gemtium)

The Church is no longer papacy and hierarchy but the People of God. We expect Church officials to speak in the language of Scripture, not that of the Magisterium, and in the inclusive language of democracy, "We the People." If we do not hear this, we choose not to listen.

Vatican II issued no dogmas, no definitions. In this first council after the declaration of papal infallibility, it declared nothing infallible and it did not reference papal infallibility to support its decisions. Indeed the pope was not present during the deliberations or the final voting. The pope approved nothing the assembly did not endorse. He gave a final signature the way a democratic American president does. He did not venture into the legislative assembly, so to speak, just as an American president does not enter into the debates going on in Congress. Watching Vatican II, one would not conclude the papacy was infallible. Indeed, as late as 1959, the consensus among Catholic theologians and bishops was that there would never be another Council since the pope was declared infallible a century before at Vatican I. The very existence of Vatican II undermined and restricted the doctrine of papal infallibility.

Every key issue passed by Vatican II, all of them by lopsided majorities, would have been resoundingly defeated as late as 1962. A number of the final documents would have been condemned as schismatic or heretical. They are now official Church policy.

At the end of Vatican II in 1965, the Catholic Church had been changed forever. It would not and could not reverse course in any substantial way. That was over. The revolution and the reform was on the record, overwhelmingly endorsed, and, indeed, in the minds and hearts of people, including conservatives. It was so deeply present in the community that even reactionaries who attacked the Council and young people who were unaware of it or saw it as irrelevant did not realize how they had been changed by it. It was over. Latin Masses were not popular; they seemed a curiosity. A reactionary pope would apologize to Muslims and Jews, enter their mosques and synagogues, pray with Protestants. Imagine a Pope praying with Protestants, publicly, and even honoring Martin Luther's birthday before Vatican II. It was over.

Imagine a meeting like this even in 1965; married priests (an oxymoron) and their wives, Protestant Christians, same-sex couples, organizing a meeting

against Vatican policy, celebrating Mass as they see fit, with women priests if need be, and no one noticing anything unusual. The questions about attending this Conference will have to do with whether the people have the time or the money to attend or what the program is and who the speakers are. No one will ask whether Catholics should be at such a meeting.

In January of this year, when I was in Rome for the fiftieth ordination anniversary of my class, we were all invited by the Pope to a private audience in which he greeted each one of us personally. He did not send word before that married priests were not welcome or their wives excluded. Nor did he limit married priests in attendance only to those canonically dispensed or only to those who were not in Corpus. It never occurred to anyone to exclude anyone. And this Pope is a conservative.

3. Change the Magisterium (Revelation Constitution)

We have gone from a rigorous exegesis of papal encyclicals in 1959 to a virtual neglect of them. Papal teaching was once more decisive than the New Testament or Tradition. Indeed, we now feel comfortable rejecting papal encyclicals outright (Humanae Vitae) and papal teaching completely (all the recent ordinations of women and the best theology written on ordaining women, all this happened after the solemn decision of John Paul II, appealing to his apostolic authority, to prohibit the ordination of women and the right to discuss it). The vast majority of Catholics who agree women should be ordained has increased since that decree.

We have gone, conservatives and liberals, from hearing the Pope so we could get a sense of what direction we should follow to hearing the Pope to decide whether we agree with him or not.

The norms that mean the most for Catholics now, conservatives and liberals, are the Gospel (what Jesus did) and conscience (what I must do). Both meant less than the Magisterium in 1962. Before Vatican II, Catholics accepted conscience only if it was normed by the Magisterium and only if it was used as a last resort against a church official who ordered them to do something clearly sinful. Conscience was then exotic; extreme, unreliable and even somehow suspiciously Protestant.

4. Change the Relationship with the World (Gaudium et Spes)

The world does not serve the Church (Middle Ages) nor is the Church above the world (papal monarchy). The Church is *in* the modern world. Indeed, we have learned since Vatican II that the major ethical and social issues of our time have been set by the world:

- The role of women

- Reproductive issues
- Same-sex relationships
- Democracy in Church and State
- The right to divorce
- The elimination of mandatory celibacy
- Charters of human rights (United Nations; U.S. Constitution; European Union)
- Abandonment of capital punishment

Catholics, by and large, find more wisdom in the world than in the papacy or in the institutional Church. Compare the great charters on human rights I cited a moment ago with the human rights listed in the 1983 Code of Canon Law.

It is naïve to suppose that the world alone is a safe haven for humanity. But the Church alone is also an unsafe place.

The Spirit, I suggest, is not less present anywhere in the world than it is in the Church. The human heart carries the Holy Spirit. Wherever the human heart is safe, in the world or Church, there God is with us.

The world, therefore, is not evil or a vale of tears, but a sanctuary where life develops and the future is open-ended and hope is endless. Catholics at large, conservatives and liberals, would be terrified to be left to the mercy of the Church alone, without the world there as an alternative. Just about every married priest and pastor found justice in the world and little of it in the Church.

The Church, nonetheless, is not to be the world's slave but its partner. The world at large does not listen to the pope but it is moved by the Church and the social justice of committed Catholics. Whenever the Church is authentic, the world hears it. Whenever the Church is a fraud, the world persecutes it. The Holocaust would have been stopped if millions of Catholic laity, priests and bishops and the pope with them surrounded the ghettos and stood on the railroad tracks and demanded that the concentration camps be closed.

The call to holiness is not in the Church but in the worldly lives we live with decency and grace. The parables of Jesus are not about the Church or Temple but about our worldly lives.

5. Change Our Definition of the Sacred (Ecumenism, World Religions, Religious Freedom)

The Decree on Ecumenism declared Orthodox and Protestant communities sacred institutions. Not schismatic or heretical, but capable of bringing Christ and the Spirit to their believing members.

The Declaration on World Religions found Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Islam sources of truth and love. The pope invited representatives of the world religions to come to Assisi and pray with him and he visited their sacred places. Catholic monks and priests, nuns and people at large made retreats and became community members of other than Christian assemblies.

The Declaration on Religious Freedom declared conscience sacred.

The sacred shifted from a pre-Copernican universe with an infallible and immovable Catholic Church at its center to a post-Copernican cosmos with God alone at its center and an ecclesial planetary system of sacred bodies, all in motion, none without light, none able to replace the other or become a center for it. Conscience brings us to the religion God has given us as the religion of our choice. A religion is sacred, not because it is right or true, but because it has the capacity to reach our hearts at a deeper spiritual level than any other religion.

The magnitude of Vatican II has been underestimated, even by the reformers. Has the Council held? Of course, it has. Our memories fail to recall how different we once were.

- In January, in Rome, for the 150th anniversary of North American College, the most reactionary bishops and cardinals celebrated some of the major liturgies; everyone celebrated in English even though all of us knew Latin, faced the congregation, gave communion in the hand inclusively to all who came forward; the homilies and ceremonies were little different from what we would say or do at a Corpus meeting.
- It is virtually impossible, around the world, to find reactionary scholars or Church officers who will publicly debate mandatory celibacy, sexual ethics, the ordination of women and so on; they know the official teaching on these issues is simply not credible and they are terrified to be publicly embarrassed by seeking to defend the indefensible; they retreat to edicts or monologues because no one can manage a convincing open discussion.
- Reactionaries have lost their courage and are frightened; the future does not belong to the fearful.
- A Catholic who married a Protestant in 1962, with Church approval, was barred from the Catholic Church and married in the Rectory, without the blessing of the rings, without communion or even the possibility of having a nuptial Mass; today, a Catholic may marry, with full endorsement, in a Catholic or Protestant Church, presided over by a minister and a priest; with communion for both partners and a nuptial Mass; with the baptism of the Protestant partner fully recognized and the Protestant tradition honored; all of this happens with hardly a second thought.

- Catholics who practiced birth control in 1962, in large numbers, were almost universally convinced they were doing something seriously wrong even if their conscience told them they often had no other choice; now Catholics, almost universally, are convinced that birth control is their decision, and that the pope is seriously wrong.
- Catholics in 1962 felt an obligation to think and act the way the pope directed, if they would be good Catholics and continue to receive communion; now, as good Catholics, receiving communion, they feel no disconnect in demanding that the pope resign, cardinals be dismissed, and bishops or priests put in prison.
- The priest shortage has come about because Catholics, conservatives as strongly as liberals, refuse the priesthood, in overwhelming numbers, if it is offered on the terms the Magisterium presents; the shortage will end, immediately, if Gospel norms and conscience are respected in the selection process.

There is no future in reactionary Catholicism. The Council has held; young people find it in the *zeitgeist* and in the world they inhabit; the essence of the Council is embedded in the truth and wisdom and life of the human family and the signs of our times. It is all inescapable now. Where the world fails, authentic Catholics will speak out; where the Church fails, the world will correct it. This is what the Incarnation and the gift of the Spirit mean for our age.

Indeed, Catholics disregard Church officials when they no longer have common sense and when what they say violates the sacred core of a believer. The Spirit does not require official Church approval before it creates new life, a new Christianity, and a new world.

2. Surviving Retrenchment

An issue of overwhelming importance for many reformers is how we survive the retrenchment. The major levers of power and decision-making have been seized by reactionaries.

In order to evaluate this sad turn of events, it is necessary to give it context. The reforms have won the minds and hearts of people. Even conservatives will not support a pre-Vatican II Church without taking many of the reforms with them. They have lost the memory of a Church without any of these reforms. There is no going back even among those who want to go back.

There are signs of a radically changed mentality everywhere.

- Conservatives as well as liberals want church officials punished for sex abuse and its cover-up; they are not as sure as they once were that their children are safe in the institutional Church.
- As we have seen, very few Catholics want to become priests; most Catholics envision or expect priests to resign; divorce and birth control are as common among conservative as among liberal Catholics.
- There is widespread indifference to official Church teaching and frequent hostility to it.
- Docility and Church attendance are as rare among young conservatives as among young liberal Catholics; indeed, both camps show a tolerance of what their parents may have seen as aberrant behavior.
- The number of times a pope, Benedict XVI, has apologized on a whole array of issues is unprecedented in Church history; even he is embarrassed and defensive about his own behavior in regulating abusive priests.

The retrenchment is not working except on the level of power and intimidation. The truth, however, cannot be controlled by a police-state mentality. The Spirit is not limited to the categories and boundaries foolish people draw.

Today, there is a sense that no healthy person would choose to preside over, live and work, in such an unstable and unreal environment. The defense and promotion of this system now requires a pathological mentality and a corruption of the truth.

How do we survive the interim until this season of darkness and discontent passes? I suggest four strategies.

1. Conscience

Conscience is not an absolute norm so that it can stand on its own. But it is an absolutely indispensable norm.

Conscience inspired resistance and integrity when Nazi and Communist officials seized the levers of power and decision-making. It can do the same when Church officials put in place a police-state. They do this because they despair that the truth is able to support their policies. In this, they are right.

Conscience has deep Catholic roots. It is essential to authenticity, grounded in a call to holiness and fundamental to personal identity. Nothing can even begin to take its place. Henry David Thoreau once asked: if doing what others want me to do is sufficient, then why did each of us get a conscience?

Thomas Aquinas said that a person is obliged to do an evil deed, if that person believes in conscience, it is a good deed. No one, he continued, has the right to obey an unjust law or to follow false teaching. Even if we give our minds and wills to official teaching we must not let our consciences go there as readily.

Luther was a Catholic and a monk, taught by Augustine and Aquinas, when he proclaimed that he had to follow his conscience and could not do otherwise. Everyone who knew the Catholic Tradition understood that.

John Henry Newman wrote:

“[in a] collision with the word of a pope...[conscience] is to be followed in spite of that word.”

He called conscience the “Vicar of Christ” for each of us. And he famously toasted conscience first and the pope second.

Vatican II gave Catholics their consciences back, so to speak, after Pius IX, Pius X and later John Paul II worked to diminish conscience in favor of absolute claims for the Magisterium.

In “The Church in the Modern World” we read:

“Deep within conscience, people discover a law they have not laid on themselves but which must be obeyed. Its voice, ever calling to love and to what is good...tells us inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. Human dignity lies in observing this law...There we are alone with God whose voice echoes in us...conscience joins Christians to others in our common search for truth.”

Understanding the Council, then, Joseph Ratzinger wrote in 1967:

“Over the pope...there stands...conscience which must be obeyed before all else, even if necessary against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority.”

Conscience, of course, should seek development and enter into dialogue with the human family and with the decency and wisdom there. Conscience is always a work in progress but it is always mine. If I lose conscience, I lose everything of value, my identity, and my integrity and people at large know this when they meet me. I forfeit my spiritual calling for a bowl of porridge and a handful of dust.

2. Friendship

Cicero (106-43 B.C.E.; 63 years) wrote two literally unforgettable essays: one on aging and one on friendship. They are compatible and I would like to consider them together.

Cicero, who died half a century before Jesus was born, is a concrete example of the wisdom in the human family that does not need Christianity to make it happen.

A word about Cicero. Two years before his death, his daughter Tullia died, in 45 B.C. E. He is devastated by the loss and it ages him. Her death occurs in a season of discontent. He is disappointed that the promise of Julius Caesar's leadership has drifted into dictatorship. (Not unlike going from the promise of Vatican II to John Paul II). Cicero feels isolated as so many of his colleagues go with those in power, against a truth once affirmed.

I might cover these essays best by giving you a running narrative of how they go, with quotes every so often.

I'm feeling old, he tells us. Not as active as I once was. I comfort myself with the thought that a tiller of a ship does not do less in bringing a ship to harbor, even if he is not as active as the younger sailors. I think about death more frequently now and I know it is near. Yet even the young have no guarantees. One learns to be grateful and to build a legacy of memories and good deeds.

Friendship is my deepest comfort. My friends are no longer the colleagues who once advanced my career but companions whose presence brings me peace. I do not choose them for their cleverness or their knowledge but simply for their presence.

Friends make me patient with my life, tolerant of its losses and ambiguities, accepting of the compromises we sometimes need to make so that others can live.

They teach me to accept the folly of life without blaming others or holding myself to some impossible standard. We who have aged have been tested and endured, failed and persevered, were rejected and survived. We learn to live with gratitude. The good we did will endure forever.

The only gift, Cicero observes, that will enable me to have no regrets at the end is friendship. He defines friendship a "complete sympathy in all matters of importance." And he adds that life is not worth living without it.

Cicero fell out of favor with Roman authorities and was executed, at the age of 63, in 43 B.C.E., one year after the assassination of Julius Caesar. No one reads the writings of those then in power, to gain comfort from them. The words of Cicero remain.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274: 49 years), a singularly unemotional writer, wrote this:

"...without friends, even the most agreeable pursuits become tedious."

And this:

“There is nothing on this earth more to be prized than true friendship.”

In summary, conscience gives me myself; friendship brings me the other.

3. Vision

What do we want the institutional Church to be or do for us?

It cannot settle my conscience or select my friends.

I do not want the institutional Church to be a teacher but a partner; not a total system, but an occasional source of insight.

It cannot give me Christ or the Spirit; I have them already.

It can help me achieve some of the values I learn about in the Church: social justice or spirituality. But I always find Catholics and others who have the same vision even if the institution would not recommend them to me.

And so, I, we, give a fair amount of energy to creative resistance. We do this because we believe the institutional Church is worth it and because something, God or conscience or the truth or friendship, something calls us to do this. Surprisingly, creative resistance has given us depth. We would have been superficial Catholics and less profoundly human without it.

John O’Mally S.J. gives us a litany about what Vatican II tried to do and what reform seeks to do. It resonates with young people as well as with their elders. It moves all of us from:

- monologue to dialogue
- command to invitation
- law to ideals
- coercion to conscience
- ruling to serving
- threats to persuasion
- behavior modification to inner conviction
- hostility to friendship
- the static to the ongoing
- rivalry to partnership
- suspicion to trust

I believe that I am truly Catholic when I do not need the institutional Church to validate me. I find this in my conscience, my friends, my vision.

I do not need the institutional Church to agree with me but to let go of trying to control me. I am happy to have it speak to me but then get out of the way. I need the institutional Church not to need to make me needy.

I need the institutional Church to stop trying to become a nursing home where eventually all my needs are addressed by others and I become helpless. (I am not against nursing homes; but they are not a future one chooses but a present one settles for). To put able-bodied and mentally sound people in a nursing home is an outrage.

Too many of the present administrators of the institutional Church are not leaders but managers. A manager often makes things right; a leader does the right thing. Every father who manages a family is a failure. Every mother who manages her children has missed her calling. A professor is not meant to manage students; nor a pastor, parishoners.

The institutional Catholic has a value and plays a role in our lives and in the life of the world. It is worth reforming because it is so massive in its potential influence and so rich in the gifts of its Tradition and sacraments. But it can never play a significant role in my life unless it takes my life seriously. The same rule applies to a spouse, a parent or a friend.

Selective Catholicism is the only way to become a comprehensive Catholic. Selective Catholicism respects conscience and the integrity of others. Total Catholicism is toxic. It makes a Church a slave plantation and it is terrified by the thought of freedom. Reforming the institutional Church is another form of abolition. Jesus of Nazareth called us to discipleship, not serfdom.

I remain certain of a few truths about the Church:

- It will continue to change.
- The model for that change will be Vatican II.
- The change will move broadly in the direction the Catholic reform movement has indicated.

I am certain of these truths because the vast majority of Catholics are there and because the young are there in overwhelming numbers even if they do not use ecclesial, theological or conciliar language.

Does anyone, with any sense, really think that women or homosexuals will have fewer rights in the future, or that birth control will be endorsed or that the Christian Churches will grow farther apart or that the papacy will ever again have the control it did between the Council of Trent and Vatican II or that any mature person in the world will

turn over to the Vatican the full responsibility for deciding who we are, what we believe, how we behave and all that it means to be a Catholic?

Does anyone really think the future will go there?

Who would think such a thing?

Why?

3. Witness

So suppose you're a Roman Catholic bishop now.

Would you be happy?

- No one listens.
- The world is elsewhere.
- Catholics are not even in line on abortion.
- You have to speak regularly against common sense, your conscience and what you know is the better pastoral approach.
- Hardly anyone wants to become a priest and many who do are people you would not want as your pastor when you began ministry.
- You feel you cannot trust or rely on laity or priests; and you are suspicious of many of your bishop colleagues.
- You are expected to police who is coming to communion.
- You have to watch the rubrics in the Liturgy like a hawk so that it is seldom an act of worship and a peaceful experience.
- There are adversaries everywhere as you see it: media, the modern world, relativists, Catholic theologians, books in general, nuns in particular.
- You have to play a role that is so scripted that they give you no lines for your own part.
- The chancery has become a bunker.
- The sex abuse cases may have at least two more generations to go.
- Everyone looks forward to your retirement or resignation.
- Liberals are everywhere.
- You know you are not winning; you are shot through with anxiety rather than tranquil confidence.

So now let us be ourselves.

Vatican II is a charter for Selective Catholicism. This is our witness.

We do what we do because we find it full of meaning. This is our witness.

We give our lives to exactly the kind of vision we affirm. This is our witness.

We find freedom and peace in this spiritual journey. This is our witness.

We live without dishonesty and cravenness, without fear or against conscience. This is our witness.

What we stand for in public is what we stand for in private. This is our witness.

We proclaim that Vatican II was not for the hierarchy (they have lost control since then) and not for the papacy (the pope is less influential since then). This is our witness.

We demonstrate that Vatican II was about people at large, the laity or baptized Christians; it was about community. This is our witness.

The hierarchy and others who cling to the institution as an institution do this because they have little else to live by. This is our witness.

We shall be Catholics for as long as we live, on our own terms, not without partners and dialogue but without intimidation and servility. This is our witness.

We are the daughters and sons, the heirs and heralds of Vatican II. This is our witness.

We shall be faithful to all we have learned and experienced from our relationship with Christ and with friends, from the wisdom we gathered by the lives we have lived. This is our witness.

We refuse to accept that all we have gained from being who we were and who we are, is of no account. This is our witness.

We shall go on, unvanquished and invincible, for the sake of our friends and our family, for the sake of our children and grandchildren, for the sake of the Gospel and the Spirit who brought us here to this point. This is our witness.

We shall prevail because we believe the Spirit of God has summoned us to be apostles and prophets, disciples and harbingers of a future the whole world is building with us. This is our witness.

We shall not falter and we shall not fail because we seek a future that includes everyone, one from which no one is rejected, the kind of a future that once made Christ send us to the ends of the earth and led the early Church to embrace the Gentiles. This is our witness.

Almost no one instinctively defines the institutional Catholic Church as a compassionate community; we seek to change that. This is our witness.

All of this is not about ourselves but about a Christ whose life makes us breathless with wonder and a God who has never let go of us, a God we believe reaches out to everyone, a Spirit who makes us restless and sets us on fire, a fire that cannot be quenched because it is the fire of love itself, the fire that moves the sun and the cosmos and all the stars. This is our witness.

We shall exclude no one except those who will not join us unless we exclude all who do not think as they do—and even here we exclude the way they think and not who they are or who they might become. This is our witness.

We go forward neither frightened, intimidated nor doubtful but stalwart and steadfast, not because we suppose we are superior but because we are convinced we have been summoned. This is our witness.

So be it. In the name of Christ.

Anthony T. Padovano
Catholic Theologian

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