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Renewing the Church in a Secular Age: Holistic Dialogue and Kenotic Vision

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Renewing the Church in a Secular Age

GEORGE F. MCLEAN*

These are exciting days for the Catholic Church. In the past too often and unnecessarily seen as counter cultural, today it appears preeminently as bringing a welcome and saving message to a confused world.

In this light the joint conference of the *Pontifical Gregorian University* and the *Council for Research in Values and Philosophy* (RVP), “Renewing the Church in a Secular Age: Holistic Dialogue and Kenotic Vision,” holds special interest.

I. Setting the Conversation

The *Pontifical Gregorian University* in Rome, founded by St. Ignatius Loyola himself, is especially well-known as a training ground in sacred doctrine for priests and bishops. The *Research Council on Values and Philosophy* (RVP) has a much briefer history but a breadth of engagements across the world. This experience has had special importance in shaping its way of reaching out to a secular world.

1. *Personal Engagement*: The work of the RVP began with a four-year project in North America on moral education with specialized teams of philosophers, psychologists and professors of education. This focused on the development of the person. But in the Anglo-Saxon, North American context it slid unintentionally, but somewhat inevitably, toward the development of the individual.

2. *Social Engagement*: However, on the very first day that this work was presented in Latin America at the Javeriana University in Bogota, Colombia, this bias was noted. The professors called for a presentation the next morning by Luis Orosco Silva on the correspondingly essential importance of social consciousness for education. Thus the RVP expanded its vision to a broader sense

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of the person not only as individual but always as essentially social and communal.

3. *Peaceful Cooperation*: But the focus of its efforts was soon called beyond Latin America by the danger of world cataclysm from the cold war between two nuclear powers. In Poland, three long afternoon conversations with Janusz Kuczinski, editor of the *Polish Philosophical Review*, explored how a small and relatively private dialogue could be honest and helpful, and set up a meeting in Munich at the neutral Kardinal Wendel Haus in the English Gardens. Ominously the Soviets, conceiving all in terms of ideological conflict, planned to send their main atheist propagandist. So it was necessary to go to Moscow to visit Professor Fedoseev, head of the Russian Academy and member of the Politbureau, to stress that this was to be, not a fight, but a high level scholarly dialogue in a common search for mutual understanding and human comity.

As a result, the meeting in Munich began not as a conflict between opposing sides, but as a joint effort. Professor George Kline rose to deliver the first paper and began by saying “I have presented this paper a number of times but have never been able to finish it. Would you help me finish my paper?” Suddenly the cold war deformations fell away and all went to work in a truly joint effort.

4. *Cultural Sensibility*: Tang Yijie was the son of Tang Yongtong, the great Buddhist scholar of pre-Marxist China, who was also President of Peking University. As son he had been taught the classical lore of his people even after such teaching was no longer politically possible. When Mao’s time and the cultural revolution had run their course Tang Yijie emerged to develop a broad program to resurrect China’s classical treasury, the International Academy of Chinese Culture. On meeting at a conference in Honolulu in the early 1980s the first halting words were “Are you interested in culture?” He was, indeed, and that interest soon developed into a series of joint conferences at Peking University and in Hong Kong.

In turn, this was extended to the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences whose Director, Wang Miaoyang, confided that as a boy he went to a Franciscan school whose principal gave the students a daily talk: “He taught me wisdom,” said Wang. So the RVP found itself also continuing a long tradition of Chinese wisdom. There followed a set of annual colloquia, held alternately in China and in countries around its borders. These discussed serially the dimensions of modern life: culture, technology, economic ethics, civil society, values, public administration, citizen participation and international relations – all as shaped and enlivened by Chinese culture. It was in sum the process of nation

building as China went about rapidly becoming one of the great countries of our times.

5. *Religious Sensitivity*: But in this same period, Islam also was gradually coming to life, if in a less coordinated and at times conflictual manner. It seemed important then to develop studies in Cairo on its philosophical and cultural heritage, to lecture at Qom in Iran, Karachi and Lahore in Pakistan, and to work on building links with and between the countries of Islamic South East Asia. This endowed the RVP with a vivid sense of the significance and problems related to philosophical and theological work in the context of fervent religious practice.

This had been an original and originating concern from the time of Vatican II and the extended process during subsequent decades. How could one remain faithful to long religious traditions while moving ahead with the onward rush of secular cultures. If this question were to be examined with the philosophy and theology of the past the answer would be to conserve the past practices of the faith. Having been correctly reasoned in those philosophical terms any other conclusions would seem to be cases of infidelity. Only if examined with new philosophical and theological principles could fidelity entail new insights and horizons of both continuity and difference. This lesson proved to be especially important also in Africa for development in all its dimensions and stages.

In sum, for the last 50 years the RVP itself has lived through a process of formation by the set of some six of the world's major cultures with which it has serially engaged. Cumulatively each area of engagement added a new horizon until the whole began to correspond to a world that was becoming truly global in outlook. These multiple and diverse human experiences fleshed out the philosophical and cultural horizons which the RVP brings to this joint conference with the Gregorian University in Rome. This pattern of development of the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy explains its ability to work with the many peoples and their cultures, their spiritualities as well as their secularity.

It was in this context that the RVP began to work with Professor Charles Taylor and José Casanova, both of whom were especially concerned with the phenomenon of secularization.

II. Disjunctions of Church and People

The phenomenon of secularization since the Reformation and the beginnings of modernity has been traced by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*. He

sees this in three modes: (1) separation of public, especially political, spaces from a religious context; (2) a lessening of ecclesial practice by the general populace, which the Pew Foundation Studies indicate as being particularly true among the younger generations of Catholics; and (3) at deeper levels of human consciousness in which religious engagement and identity are no longer expected but instead have become a difficult choice or option. It is upon this last that Charles Taylor focuses his attention, but undoubtedly the first two constitute enabling political and social contexts.

This has been summarized by Professor Taylor for the present project under four existential disjunctions, namely, between:

1/ “the seekers” who wish to realize in their life new and more personally authentic ways of being Christian and Catholic *vs* “the dwellers” who feel that in the Church all is already clear, well defined and simply to be assiduously followed;

2/ those who bring a modern sense of personal responsibility to Church teaching in search of critical adherence *vs* the Church as a jurisdictional authority to which is due obedience;

3/ ethical and moral praxis understood as a human, fallible and historical achievement *vs* a natural law morality built on abstract, unchanging and universal essences; and

4/ a spirituality open to enrichment by the experiences and spiritualities of the many great religious cultures and civilizations, and even the nonreligious, *vs* a stress on the completeness of the Christian spiritual tradition focused on the Second Person of the Trinity.

These four disjunctions could be read at a relatively surface level where in terms of today’s rampant individualism the loss of the social context of belief provided by Church might appear to be of little account. But to be trapped in oneself and lose the ability to transcend is to lose the essence of religion as liberation and to be condemned to a life of frustrated aspirations. Or understood as diverse personal psycho-social attitudes the disjunctions might simply constitute the well-noted division among Church members in the interpretation and implementation of Vatican II. In either case the response might be a return to the Church’s earlier self-understanding.

However, two major factors indicate this to be thoroughly insufficient. The first is Taylor’s long narrative of the last four centuries which shows the process of secularization not to be a process of subtraction constituted by modernity’s

progressive abandonment of religious factors. That would accord with the modernization theory of Weber *et al.*, for whom modernity and religion are bound in a zero sum tension. Instead Taylor shows the process of secularization to be integral to the major search for human self-fulfillment. If that be the case then it calls into question the habitual Catholic response calibrated to the modernization theory, namely, the Church's effort to defend itself by restoring what had been subtracted. That begins by attacking nominalism and individualism, with the intent of restoring the *status quo ante*. While not erroneous, uncalled for or fruitless, such an effort has led to a characteristic Catholic attitude, namely, that those subtractions are the fault of "the other" for not listening to the Church. It tends to consider itself to have the truth not only on key issues of faith and morals, but in all the supporting theology and philosophy. Hence it cannot effectively engage the general disjunction of Church horizons from the contemporary socio-cultural context in the four specific "Catholic" variants which Taylor identifies.

Yet these, in turn, lay out the map for a restorative research effort. That began with an effort to render the problematic as precise and perspicacious as possible. This laid the ground for the focused work of research teams on each of the four disjunctions.

That level of analysis and projected response, however, was radically shocked by the "scandals" emerging in the late 60s and the 70s. As these issues moved from the perpetrators to their episcopal overseers, and up the chain of responsibility to the Vatican itself, it appeared that the broad overriding concern had been the reputation of a supposedly spotless Church, even to the detriment of its own vulnerable young. Secular legal powers declared such actions of some chancery officials to have been so alien to contemporary secular norms as to call for criminal prosecution. Pope Benedict, in turn, bemoaned the whole tragedy in the poignant words: "What went wrong ... in our entire way of living the Christian life to allow such a thing to happen!"

We have then not only a legitimate matter for philosophical and theological research which will require all the scientific competencies of those and related social sciences. Moreover, this is no ordinary academic exercise, but rather an utter tragedy for the Church as witness to Christ and his salvific sacrifice on the Cross. Where before it was thought that the problem was that the world was not listening to the Church, it now becomes rather that the Church is in such disjunction from the legitimate modern aspirations of its members that the teacher and shepherd has become traitor to the flock and criminal before the law.

What this so desperately bespoke was, of course, the utter urgency of rethinking the entire nature of the Church and its presence in quite different, indeed kenotic, terms. Moreover, beyond responding to the tragic urgency of the present crises, this can also help to orient present theological investigations toward the new discoveries needed for bearing witness to Gospel values in this secular age.

Turning then to Taylor's four disjunctions takes us into the field of creative theology and religiously based reflection. If focused upon stating the problem this can make important, though as yet only initial suggestions. Nevertheless, the separate horizons of the four disjunctions converge in their repeated suggestions of the need for a change to a kenotic theology of Church. This entails a shift from the evangelist John's descent of the Logos into time, as top-down and tinged always with a sense of divine glory. That had as implications: (a) a focus upon the perfection of the Church as Mystical Body and "spotless bride of Christ," (b) whose reputation is therefore ever to be protected, and (c) which, in turn, has had the tragic consequence of protecting the Church as institution over the welfare of its young.

Instead this study points to Philippians 2:5-11 with its account of Christ not holding to the form of God but emptying himself in order to take human form, indeed the form of a servant and to surrender even this on the Cross. This leads to a bottom-up approach, quite opposite to glory and perfection. It starts from the humanity of Christ and indeed his sacrificial death – or even from creation as *ex nihilo*. It opens a sense of God less as uncompromisedly absolute and immobile, and rather as able to share with a universe and science which have their own autonomy and laws, and at the level of humankind even their own freedom. It would include also a critique of our overreaching technological sense of power to do everything, which can lead to social and political conflict. Instead it opens a metaphysics and ethics of the creativity of powerlessness and of a search for harmony and beauty. This has been the work of the RVP research teams in this project on "Faith in a Secular Age" which began from the four 'disjunctions' identified by Charles Taylor and José Casanova. But thanks to the marvelous impact of Pope Francis this has been transformed into a set of four 'conjunctions' (see *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age*, Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012). Here we shall look to this transformation in order to identify the prospective contribution of this joint conference on the Church and its renewal in a secular age.

Here we shall consider only the first disjunction: that of the seeker. But concern for the magisterium, its moral teaching and plural spiritualities should rightly follow in the sessions discussing the Church as listening and discerning, welcoming and serving.

III. Conjunctions of Church and People

The general phenomenon of progressive secularization over the last 400 years must be seen in the light of: first, the broad human processes of the Reformation reacting against hierarchy, and the corresponding affirmation of individual authenticity and equality; second, the Enlightenment's disjunction of human reason from the unitive influences of wisdom and faith; and third, democracy and human freedom in the evaluation and guidance of human action. All these came together after World War II upon the development of the pervasive personal communication system which bypassed the parish church as the dominant context for the formation of one's personal outlook. Hence, it became especially common for young persons to set out on life with the attitude of seekers embarking on the exciting, if at times threatening, adventure of constructing their own life in their own terms. More threatening to their effort than the danger of occasional mistakes, they consider to be the imposition of a predetermined pattern of life or culture which one is destined to follow.

The first set of disjunctions/conjunctions begins then with the seekers in contrast to those focused on dwelling within the Church and its traditions. The enigmas of existence emphasized by contemporary theory and culture and the many and developing challenges to be faced in life generate in the seeker a sense of the inadequacy of universal laws. This leads increasingly to a search to build life with the individualistic coordinates of modernity.

Here the seekers can be seen less as having left the people of God, than as struggling to live the deep inspiration of the Spirit in facing their multiple responsibilities in the Church and the world, internal and external. The cost of their search for authenticity can be very high as it takes them beyond the mere following of authorities and the mimetic attitudes of neighbors and confreres. Their need is not for a Church as an ideal institution, but one that is no longer enchanted and in many ways is a fallible, human and humane way of living the gospel values. This is a community marked not by power and control, but by acceptance and encouragement of those who look to it in the midst of the needs they experience in their search. Here Christ on the Cross is the kenotic model for

the Church in manifesting an endless willingness to suffer in order to serve.

Yet these same challenges lead others “as dwellers” to seek the constant guidance available in a Church tradition and the desire to have this articulated as amply as possible. This places Church leadership uncomfortably between two – and more – groups with quite different needs and expectations.

In terms of interior self-consciousness this is in effect the formation of one’s very identity as described in Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*. Here the truly challenging task is to relate the ecclesial and the secular in ways that are mutually complementary and enriching. For example, can the role of the Church be not an alternative to that of the secular state but, as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas have come to see, a helpful enablement of the human democratic endeavor. Indeed, one can go still further with Jürgen Habermas and Robert Bellah to recognize the presence of proto-religious modes of ritual and myth in the very origins of humanness itself, e.g., in the emergence of the ability to be conscious of and to express the unitive relation to others that founds and constitutes humane social life and behavior.

An alternate path sees living one’s Catholic identity no longer as being part of an institution that is superior and opposed to the efforts of the people to build their nation from the ground up, but rather in the supportive terms of leaven and narrative. This entails a theology of Church in the kenotic terms of suffering servant. Thus it might be regretted that the nation has become more of a law enforcing than a political entity built on the will of the people, and similarly that the Church has come to be more of a moral than a spiritual institution. Together they leave “a world without forgiveness and without project.”

This points toward some surprising suggestions, such as the following: a) that the Church needs to evoke lively debate among the laity in order for them to come to a consciousness of the living reality of the Holy Spirit at the core of their lives and of their Church; b) that in the face of the rampant individualism which accompanies the contemporary sense of human freedom and autonomy the state is in need of the sense of human unity and community which religion articulates and can support; c) that a renewed appreciation of humankind can restore the dynamic sense of history; and d) that in turn the heterogeneity of history needs the deeper sense of charity so that humanity can be not merely a sum, but a relation which, while rooted in the particular, opens towards the universal.

To move beyond the exclusivism of a disconnected religion some would replace religion as an objective category by the subjective category of faith, the sense of a cumulative tradition, and the shared category of the transcendent

which is the “object” of all faiths. While this points to a pluralism, a Catholic concern is to unite this with a Christology of the unique and universal Savior. This road is opened by a theology of the Holy Spirit as expressed richly in the orthodox traditions of the East. This finds the Spirit present in “society and history, peoples, cultures and religions” (cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 28 and W. Hryniewicz, *The Spirit, The Cry of the World*¹). This could be reinforced by stress on the solidarity of peoples rooted in their common origin and destiny if related to a Christology, not of an imperial messiah, but of kenosis and cross leading to resurrection and new life. What then is to be done? Peter Jonkers contributed to this project an article on the Church as a minority institution lacking political power due to its declining levels of lay participation, of clergy and religious. He points to the work of the late Paul Ricoeur, once Dean of the University of Paris and member of this Council for Research in Values and Philosophy. Professor Ricoeur gave great attention in his hermeneutics (e.g. his *Conflict of Interpretations*) to this effort to understand other mentalities. This required an interest or willingness to respect and appreciate – though not necessarily to agree with or assume – another’s position on a point under discussion.

Here the logic is not that of science where every discovery must be exactly replicable by anyone willing to carry out the procedures of the original experiment. Indeed, it is a great scandal when this does not prove to be so, as exact, universal and univocal language and outcomes are of the essence. In religious affairs, however, this is not the case; in fact, this is not scientific description at all. That emerged with the Greeks and hence relatively quite late in human history after untold millennia of human development – specifically it came after Homer and life in relation to the panoply of the gods, which he described in the *Iliad*.

In the Bible and the teachings of Jesus the language is not that of precise scientific description; rather it is action oriented, being concerned with motivation and orientation. This is a language to teach wisdom, which uses analogy and parable. It evokes insight – indeed differing insights – in each one who hears or reads it no matter how many they may be or how often. In this sense it projects and promotes the freedom and creativity of each; it orients distinct lives in different contexts and cultures, each in their proper diversity.

This may be part of the reason why, despite the emerging proliferation and

¹ Direct access to this work is available under the following link: <http://goo.gl/vDXxye>.

progress of science and its language, it is not capable of keeping up with the expansion and challenge of human experience. This has moved from local to national, and from national to international. But almost suddenly in the last 30 years all this has been transcended and is now global. The result is a world in utter confusion no longer able to understand and respond to its own evolution.

In these circumstances everything contributes and we look attentively to the sciences, but know that they do not keep up with political and economic developments and especially with the admixture and interaction of peoples and their cultures. Holistic dialogue must find another radically more open language in order to formulate, to suggest and to express the inspiration and orientation needed for life in these times; and this perhaps even more so now than in the past great ages of faith.

Indeed, as modern individualism develops the relationships which constitute the social relations essential to human flourishing or even survival, it begins to be suspected that life must be lived in a “new key”. It is not that of self-assertion and hence of interpersonal conflict, but of a kenotic vision which enables people, societies and the Church to listen, to sacrifice and to serve in unity with others.

That is the key to this present effort at Church renewal. Its 16 research teams have been working to understand and heal the disjunctions between Church and people manifest in the outflow of seekers in search of the spirit, the efforts of the magisterium to guide the life of the Church, its moral teaching and the plural spiritualities of all peoples.

The present conference will then seek to draw out resulting insights regarding the Church as listening and discerning, as welcoming and serving under the title: “Renewing the Church in a Secular Age: Holistic Dialogue and Kenotic Vision”.