

legal immigration or gun control? — others are not.

We do people no favors if, out of a misguided love, we lead them astray. And if we place a social ministry (even if the works are beneficial) ahead of the salvation of souls (the Great Commission), then we fail not only those we are trying to help, but ourselves and God as well.

And so the balance between orthodoxy and orthopraxy has to be measured against our Lord's teaching — the first great commandment *and then* the second; right beliefs *preceding* right actions in order for those actions not to go astray or be misguided. Only then can we truly love God and properly love our neighbor as ourselves. ■

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## DOGMAS ARE NOT ABSTRACTIONS

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THOMAS STORCK

### PAUL VI'S OTHER NEGLECTED DOCUMENT

**T**he summer of 1968 is justly famous for two documents issued by Bl. Pope Paul VI. One, of course, is his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, issued on July 25, which reiterated the Church's unchangeable teaching that the use of contraceptives is contrary to the natural law. But less than a month before that, on June 30, to mark the closing of the Year of Faith, Pope Paul issued a *motu proprio* arguably of greater importance than *Humanae Vitae*. Titled *Solemni Hac Liturgia*, it was a solemn profession of faith, often called the "Credo of the People of God," which he "proclaimed before the Basilica of St. Peter." The importance of *Humanae Vitae* should be clear to any knowledgeable Catholic, but the importance of the *Credo* might not be. Yet in the measure that the doctrines of the faith are prior to the precepts of Christian morals, and that it is the former that guarantee our correct understanding of

the latter, the truths contained in Paul VI's solemn profession of faith are what give rise to the moral authority he exercised in his condemnation of contraception in *Humanae Vitae*.

Christians in the U.S., both Catholics and Protestants, have often had a moralistic cast of mind — that is, they have been more interested in moral questions than dogmatic ones. As a result, both liberal and conservative Catholics, once the restraints of ecclesiastical authority were removed in the general collapse of discipline following the Second Vatican Council, have been quite willing to cooperate pretty much uncritically with Protestants — but only with the type of Protestants who share the same moral and political stance. Thus, conservative Catholics and evangelical Protestants produced the joint statement "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," whose signers "resolved to explore patterns of working and witnessing together in order to advance the one mission of Christ," just as liberal Catholics generally share similar moral and political positions with liberal or mainline Protestants. This is not to deny that such cooperation can at times be legitimate and necessary. But it is nevertheless clear that because of such cooperation we tend to downplay our doctrinal differences in pursuit of

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some shared moral or political goal.

Paul VI's "*Credo* of the People of God" is primarily a restatement of the Nicene Creed, to which the Pope appends comments "which the spiritual conditions of our age demand." These comments are what make the profession of faith so valuable, for they address, in a surprisingly direct manner, many of the doctrinal points that were called into question in 1968, some of which are still widely denied, or at least ignored, by Catholics today. The *Credo* is not long, consisting of seven introductory sections followed by the profession of faith itself and the Pope's comments. Rather than summarize all of it, let us focus on Paul's comments on certain crucial matters.

In the opening section of the *Credo*, Paul states that he had dedicated the Year of Faith that was just concluding to the commemoration of SS Peter and Paul, "that we might testify Our steadfast will of guarding incorruptly the deposit of faith which they transmitted to us." Although this might seem like nothing more than standard ecclesiastical language, the statement that the Church's faith is in fact something transmitted to us from the Apostles, and that we have a duty to preserve it without corruption, is of immense importance. The contents of the faith have been handed down to us from our Lord and His Apostles, explained and systematized by the Church Fathers and later theologians, especially St. Thomas Aquinas, and made more definite by subsequent teachings of the Magisterium. They are definitely not "up for grabs" by each new generation. Development of doctrine is a legitimate theological fact, to be sure, but genuine development cannot mean that what was formerly true now becomes false, or vice versa. It simply means that our understanding of a doctrine is deepened, though the doctrine still retains its original meaning.

In section 5 of the *Credo*, Paul turns to another crucial question, something so fundamental that, without a correct understanding of it, even the existence of God could be affirmed only as something probable. The Pope says that "beyond what is observable, known by the help of the sciences, the intelligence given to us by God is able to attain *that which is*." Since Immanuel Kant (d. 1804), by and large, philosophy has restricted human knowledge to mere appearances and has denied that we can know whatever ultimate realities, if any, that might

exist. On this basis, the validity of the traditional arguments for the existence of God is denied, and in the end religion is reduced to a guessing game or an irrational leap of faith. So when Pope Paul wrote these words, he challenged a central tenet of most contemporary philosophies. Among living philosophies, only Thomism argues reliably for the possibility of a genuine knowledge of *that which is*. Without such knowledge of reality, we will have no other starting point for knowledge of God except the modernist position that religion begins with human needs and feelings.

In the final preliminary section, Paul notes that he will offer a profession of faith in order to "speak a firm testimony to the divine Truth which

## Scholarship Fund

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has been entrusted to the Church so that she might announce it to all peoples." Here we have another article of the faith that is frequently contested today: that God has entrusted His revelation to the Catholic Church alone, and that her divine mission is to announce this revelation to the whole world. To many of our contemporaries, it seems increasingly absurd that there could be only one true religion. But without denying the elements of truth that exist in other religions, Catholics must affirm, without hesitation, that the Church's teaching is God's revelation to mankind, and that since God can neither deceive nor be deceived, what the Church teaches is therefore true. It is not a matter of anyone's spiritual insights, no matter how holy or deep, but a communication of God's truth. Once we have considered what are called the motives of credibility, or preliminaries to faith proper — such as the existence of God or the revelation made in and by Jesus Christ — and come to the conclusion that these are true and worthy of belief, we must in turn accept the contents of revelation, namely, the teachings of the Catholic Church.

In section 8, Paul begins the profession of faith proper. Here, when speaking of God, "Creator of things visible and things invisible," he notes the existence of "pure spirits, whom we call angels," and in section 12 he reminds us that "those who reject the love of God until the end will be doomed to the never ending fire." And in section 16 he makes clear that original sin means that "all have sinned in Adam." Here we have the recognition of the existence of angels, of Hell, and of our father Adam — three facts that are widely disbelieved or ignored by a majority of Catholics today.

The doctrine of Hell is sometimes advanced as a reason for abandoning Catholic belief, and it is true that there are aspects of the doctrine that will always remain veiled and mysterious to us in this life. But the existence of Hell cannot be removed from the teachings of the Church; indeed, it was one of the points upon which our Lord spoke most frequently. If we grasp the reasons for accepting Christian revelation as true, then we must likewise accept the existence of Hell, and accept on the authority of God that Hell is consistent with His justice and His mercy.

In section 19 we find more doctrine that is de-emphasized today. Paul VI states, "We believe in

one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, built by Jesus Christ on the rock which is Peter. This is the mystical Body of Christ." This straightforward statement that the Catholic Church *is* the one Church of Christ, His Mystical Body, is vitally important at a time when ecumenism as practiced by both liberal and conservative Catholics has virtually effaced the notion that the Catholic Church and the Church of Christ are one and the same thing. The statement in *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," that "the sole Church of Christ which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic...*subsists in* the Catholic Church" (no. 8; italics added) is sometimes invoked to suggest that it is wrong to associate the identity of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church. But Pope Paul's solemn profession of faith, as well as several other magisterial documents of Vatican II and later, make it clear that such an understanding of *Lumen Gentium* is wrong, and that Catholics can continue to assert that the Catholic Church *is* the Church of Jesus Christ. So even though Paul goes on to say that "outside the frame of the Church of Christ many elements of holiness and truth are found," he expresses the fundamental principle of any genuine ecumenism by saying that "we hope that Christians who do not yet enjoy full communion of the only Church, be united in one flock with one Shepherd."

In the next two sections, Pope Paul continues to speak of the Church, again pointing out a number of truths that are often denied or ignored. These include the fact that the Church is the "heir of the divine promises and daughter of Abraham," and, quoting the First Vatican Council, that we are to believe "what is contained in the word of God written or handed down and proposed to be believed by the Church either by a solemn judgment or by her ordinary and universal magisterium." And in section 21, he states that the Church "which Christ founded and for whom he poured out prayers is one in faith and worship and in the bond of a hierarchical communion."

Finally, in section 25, Pope Paul goes into some detail to reaffirm the dogma of transubstantiation, which theologians frequently challenged in the late 1960s. Paul proclaims that, because of the "change of the entire substance of bread into his Body and of the entire substance of the wine

into his Blood," only the accidents (properties) of bread and wine remain: "Which mysterious change fittingly and properly is called by holy Church transubstantiation."


It is clearer to speak of *transubstantiation* than simply of the *real presence* of Christ in the Eucharist. This is because the former term leaves no doubt as to the "conversion of the *entire* substance of bread into his Body" and the "conversion of the *entire* substance of wine into his Blood," whereas the latter term might leave room for thinking that, together with the presence of Christ's Body and Blood, remnants of the bread and wine still exist. Lutherans, for example, officially assert their belief in the "real presence"; their doctrine, sometimes known as *consubstantiation*, affirms that "in, with, and under the *bread* Christ gives us His *true body*; in, with, and under the *wine* He gives us His *true blood*." The term *transubstantiation*, on the other hand, upholds beyond the possibility of any doubt that the Catholic Church teaches the "change of the entire substance" of the elements into the divine realities of Christ's Body and Blood.

As mentioned above, many of Paul VI's comments concern doctrinal matters that have been widely denied or at least ignored since Vatican II. In the late 1960s, and up into the 1980s and 1990s, there was considerable explicit denial of important doctrines of the Church. This still occurs today, especially in many Catholic colleges and universities, but perhaps even more troubling is the wholesale neglect of the doctrines of the faith, as if they were merely details about which we need not concern ourselves. Homilies are at best helpful discussions of some spiritual point taken from the day's readings, and at worst vague or rambling commentaries on those readings. Rarely does one hear an explanation of the specifics of Catholic doctrine or the connection between the biblical passage that was read and the dogmas of the Church. Although outright denial of doctrine might be rarer today than it was in 1968, it might be better if a doctrine were denied rather than ignored. In the former case, someone might rise up to defend the Church's teaching, while in the latter we are lulled to sleep by a repetition of reminders of the love of God or exhortations to pray and perform good works — all excellent and necessary, of course, but all too apt to become meaningless if divorced from the dogmas of the

faith. The faithful are rarely taught, for example, of the supreme importance of holding onto the faith "once delivered to the saints," of the final destiny of each human soul, of the fall of the human race, of grace and the sacraments, or of the uniqueness of the Catholic Church. Perhaps priests imagine that their parishioners already know and believe all this, but if so, they are mistaken. The findings of recent Pew Forum and CARA surveys indicate that a great number of Catholics have abandoned the faith, and that if it were not for immigration, the real number of Catholics in the U.S. would be in sharp decline. Whatever we are doing now does not seem to be working very well.

The doctrines of the Church of Christ are salvific; they point us to the spiritual realities of our redemption on the cross, the grace offered to us in the sacraments, and the Church as the ark of salvation. Moreover, the dogmas of the faith guarantee to us the moral teachings of the Church. These dogmas are not abstractions that play no role in the lives of ordinary Christians. But if dogmas are seldom

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mentioned, they will come to be seen as abstractions that the Church officially proclaims but which no one need take seriously. Such a state would be the practical death of any vital life among Catholics, both lay and clerical.

Orthodox Catholics both praise Pope Paul VI for his heroic promulgation of *Humanae Vitae* and criticize him for his naïve expectation that God

would sanction his many alterations of Catholic liturgy and practice with an outpouring of grace not seen since the day of Pentecost. While arguments could be made to support either judgment, we should not forget this Pope's reaffirmation with clarity and precision of the doctrinal foundations of the faith, without which both morality and liturgical discipline rest upon nothing. ■

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## VITAL WORKS RECONSIDERED, #38

Rob Agnelli

# A THOMISTIC VISION OF MAN'S FINAL END

*The Divine Comedy.* By Dante Alighieri.

In his latest novel, *Inferno*, author Dan Brown borrows liberally from (one might even say distorts) Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Brown's protagonist, Prof. Robert Langdon, must decipher codes found in Dante's epic poem in order to stop the release of a plague as the answer to the "problem of overpopulation." What is quite clear when one reads

Dante's journey through the afterlife is that he too was concerned with plagues, but those of a moral rather than a medical kind. In fact, it is not just the innovative use of *terza rima* that makes Dante's epic so remarkable, it is the imaginative manner in which he depicts man's journey toward his ultimate end. The philosophical foundation upon which Dante built the *Divine Comedy* was, however, far from a product of its author's imagination. Rather, Dante relied heavily on the philosophical vision of St. Thomas Aquinas in order to construct his epic. Indeed, the *Divine Comedy* has been commonly referred to as the "Summa in verse."

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It is evident, for example, that Dante was familiar with Aquinas's treatise on happiness, found in the first twenty-one questions of Parts I-II of the Angelic Doctor's *Summa Theologiae* (ST). Therein, St. Thomas taught that the pursuit of happiness is not something we choose to engage in but something we are *designed* to engage in: Man, he says, "is incapable of not wanting to be happy" (ST, I-II, q.5, a.4, ad 2). Dante is told something similar by Virgil, who says that "the soul at birth...will move towards anything that pleases it" (*Purgatorio*, Canto XVIII, lines 19-21).

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