

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE 2015 SYNOD?

PART M

An Urgent and Disturbing Aside (Continued)

Here we will end our consideration of the Fatima Crusaders' opposition to the Pope and his movement to create a new reformed Church more in tune with the Gospel of Christ.

One big idea that keeps surfacing in this opposition is that in the Church things from Vatican II onward have gotten worse. Consider the following. "Prior to the supposed release of the Third Secret of Fatima in the Year 2000, Cardinal Ratzinger said that it contains essentially the same warning that was issued by Our Lady of Akita, Japan, where the Blessed Virgin said:

"The work of the devil will infiltrate even into the Church in such a way that one will see Cardinals opposing Cardinals, Bishops against other Bishops. The priests who venerate Me will be scorned and opposed by their confreres. Churches and altars will be sacked. The Church will be full of those who accept compromises, and the demon will press many priests and consecrated souls [religious] to leave the service of the Lord.'

"Evidence suggesting that we are experiencing these terrible events at this very moment is all around us, e.g., events surrounding the Synod of Bishops on marriage and family, priest shortages and dwindling religious orders, the persecution of the Church throughout the world, etc." ("Reviled and Yet Blessed," Louie Verrechio, The Fatima Crusader, Summer 2015, pages 40-41)

Or "from the time of the Second Vatican Council and the crisis of Faith that ensued, the shepherd (in Rome) is struck and the sheep are scattered. Catholics have never been so divided. Various individuals and groups are trying the best they can to live the Faith as they understand it. A number of these groups end up at odds with one another." ("Goodbye to the Soft-Spoken Warrior," John Vennari, The Fatima Crusader, Summer 2015, pages 24-26)

Let us take a moment here and catch our breath again and re-focus on what we are doing here. It took some time (and space) to do the above. So why did we do this and take this specific journey? The purpose here is our need to understand the Church of today and to discern what is needed, according to Our Holy Father (Francis). One good way to do so is to see something about the nature of the opposition the Pope has to face to accomplish this.

It is all very relevant to our investigation/study because of the ongoing mention of Synods, Vatican II, etc. This mention is a negative approach that influences a surprising number of Catholics "on the right." Keep always in mind that our present Holy Father is working hard to establish a synodal Church that makes greater use of the riches and insights of Vatican II. Our somewhat extended look at the Fatima Crusade is to use a well-known good clear "case study" of the situation which is quite useful for a sociological understanding of today's Church: case studies have proven their worth and value for those investigative disciplines that make use of them and so we borrow loosely this tool for our own purposes. We could use other examples of far-right Catholic opposition to Francis, e.g., the very conservative newspaper The Wanderer or the pro-life Interim at times but our study of the Fatima Crusade/The Fatima Crusader magazine is more than sufficient for our purposes!

And you certainly can have a great deal of certainty that Pope Francis is very well aware of this Crusade and what it is trying to do; and I am sure that he recognizes its opposition to him and the obstacles it creates for his work of the Spirit.

A word here on the section, "An Urgent and Disturbing Aside," that has developed in our comments/reflections which would be helpful at this time. This section is turning out to be longer than I originally thought and it came out of the context of our beginning to look at the 2015 Synod. The big

question here is how are we going to understand the Synod if we do not have some rudimentary notion of the sociological make-up of the Church of today with all of its ups and downs? There is also much more involved here than I originally thought after this path of investigation got started.

Thus we will retain this section here in its present position until it is completed. This means also that we will need to finish this topic before we come back to look formally at the 2015 Synod. We need to keep reminding ourselves that the 2014 and 2015 Synods especially are essential to what Pope Francis is trying to accomplish and so we will complete our investigation as soon as we can (and I ask you for your indulgence as we do this!). Like Vatican Council II, we will always be able to learn a great deal from the Synods (especially that of 2015) because of their great importance and, therefore, it is well worth our while to take our time to do this contextualization properly.

In my research, I ran across an excellent article, "Pope Francis, the hermeneutic [‘the art and science of interpreting ... and of inquiring into the true sense (of the text)’ – Doctor Henry J. Grimmelman, ‘Hermeneutics,’ The Catholic Encyclopedia Dictionary, edited under the direction of the Editors of The Catholic Encyclopedia] of conspiracy and the ‘Three F;s’" posted on January 21, 2016 by researcher Peter Bannister in the Category of “Church and Papacy”; it was posted on Thinking Faith: The Online Journal of the British Jesuits. We will take a good look at it because it sheds a great deal of light on the matter at hand.

“How many conspiracy theories about Pope Francis have you heard? It is likely that you have come across at least one, and if your natural reaction was to dismiss it out of hand, perhaps you have missed a trick. The author of a new book on the Pope’s ‘not-so-cultured despisers’ [interdisciplinary researcher Peter Bannister, author of the e-book No False Prophet: Pope Francis and his not-so-cultured despisers which is well worth getting – information from the above website] argues that such narratives have a sociological significance and require our attention if we are to understand the phenomenon of Pope Francis.

“Surely nobody following Church developments since the election of Pope Francis in March 2013 with even moderate attention can have failed to notice that a major characteristic of his Pontificate thus far has been the perhaps unparalleled polarisation of opinion, in and outside Catholicism, concerning the present holder of the Petrine Office. While his rapturous American reception in September [2015] indicated the Pope’s unflagging popularity on the world stage, the rise of a strange and disturbing parallel phenomenon also needs to be acknowledged: statements from a growing number of those professing to be Christians that Pope Francis is variously a Communist infiltrator, doctrinal pyromaniac or even the False Prophet of the Apocalypse [the biblical book called ‘The Book of Revelation’]. For those readers who may think I exaggerate, let me suggest a brief exercise in ‘applied sociology of religion.’ First type ‘Pope Francis False Prophet’ into an internet video search engine. Sort results by number of views. You may well be surprised to discover the size of the audience for conspiratorial narratives concerning Jorge Mario Bergoglio [the Pope]. If you then re-shuffle the results by publication date you will also realize that such narratives are proliferating rapidly, the latest trigger being the Pope’s January 2016 video expressing his prayer intentions regarding inter-religious dialogue. If you can stomach it, complete this little exercise by watching a few minutes of the latest anti-Francis videos and measuring the distance of your jaw from the floor.

“Much of this anti-Papal invective is naturally extremely crude, and the first reaction to it might be simple amusement at what any thinking viewer ought to be able to dismiss as nothing more than the latest ‘urban legend’ [stories that grow up in today’s culture without our seeing their origins]. I would, however, like to contend that such a reaction, though understandable, would be mistaken on several counts.” (Thinking Faith above)

Bannister goes on to state “that this material is manifest nonsense is unfortunately anything but self-evident” (Thinking Faith). Practically all of us know someone who believes conspiracy theories that come from alternative information sources. “This is no laughing matter inasmuch that allowing one’s worldview to be moulded by such new mythologies can have extremely damaging

psychological and relational consequences. Conspiracy theories are truly habit-forming and obsession-inducing, substantial amounts of mental and emotional energy being required in order to maintain belief in them when faced with external reality. Considerable cognitive dissonance is provoked when conspiracy theories' frequent grain of truth (after all, human beings do conspire) is confronted with real-life evidence apparently contradicting the theory, and dealing with this dissonance comes at a price.

“Once accepted as interpretive frameworks for understanding the world, conspiratorial narratives often estrange their advocates from those around them, with whom they no longer have a shared logic facilitating two-way communication. [Take a moment to think about this from your own experience and you will note how true are Bannister’s comments here.] My guess is that many of us feel powerless to converse rationally with such individuals and attempt to avoid them whenever possible. Mutual exasperation is guaranteed whenever certain subjects are broached, not primarily because our opinions differ, but rather because our understanding of what constitutes reasoned discourse are incompatible. It is truly difficult when someone tells you with a straight face that your views are the result of brainwashing by a CIA [Central Intelligence Agency of the United States government] mind control programme (or for that matter by Jesuit propaganda, which for some conspiracy theorists amounts to the same thing). [Note the tongue-in-cheek note here!] Implicit in the popular rise of the conspiratorial mindset is a crisis of rationality, which in itself is a social phenomenon requiring serious investigation.” (Thinking Faith) Amen! Amen!

Allow me to state here that this is the best psychological-sociological explanation of what conspiracy theories do to us that I have ever seen. Hence the long quotations above from Bannister and Thinking Faith – I want you to have a real good explanation and understanding of the phenomenon because it is so very important for understanding what is happening in today’s Church and the papacy of Francis. If we are going to help the Pope create the new Church, we need to understand this well so that we can be more effective change agents!

One more thing I would like to add here. We are called to live out Christ’s Commandment of Love: note that there are three loves here – love of God, love of neighbour, and (proper) love of self. Adopting conspiracy thinking at base is really not to love the self – just consider what it does to you that is bad! See the above! Furthermore, this kind of thinking at base hurts our neighbour and that also is bad! Let us, then, understand as much as we can about conspiratorial thinking because then we can help our neighbours move away from such thinking. Realize that this is powerful way of exercising mercy during this Jubilee Year of Mercy!

Let us now return to what Bannister is saying.

Moreover, “while many ‘alternative media’ sources portraying a Pope Francis in league with the Antichrist may strike readers of Thinking Faith as primitive or culturally alien, this should not blind us to their sociological impact or significance as barometers of our times. [So very true!] Our reading habits and professional activities can sometimes delude us into thinking that not only the world but also the universal Church consists solely of those holding advanced degrees, but to ignore the very real importance of ‘popular religion’ is at best to hold a naïve view of the religious practice of 95% of the world’s Christians and at worst to engage in culpable intellectual snobbery. In largely neglecting popular piety as an object of serious study, academic theology bears some responsibility for the fact that fundamentalist religious narratives within Christianity have gone largely unchecked in recent years. This is an ethical as well as an intellectual issue: it is worth remembering that ‘instructing the ignorant’ (rather than sneering at them from a distance or simply refusing to engage with them) is one of the seven works of spiritual mercy highlighted by Francis in this Jubilee Year. Herein definitely lies what might be politely termed a ‘growth opportunity’; broadly speaking, the academic theological community has neither been able to make itself intelligible to a broad audience [please be aware that this latter is the hope of the present Consortium!] nor to dialogue constructively and respectfully with those who are far more likely to consult (alternative sources) than (the regular theological sources).

Initiating such dialogue is challenging because it is clearly insufficient to attempt to ‘instruct the ignorant’ using thought-categories and vocabulary which they cannot understand: any successful pedagogical approach must begin from within their paradigms, a translation requiring much effort as well as unfashionable intellectual humility.” (Thinking Faith) Trying to do the approach described here is also another objective of the Consortium; please pray that our attempts and work will be of service to the Church! Thank you!

As well, “much current anti-Francis diatribe stems from a distinctly ‘low-brow’ United States fundamentalist Evangelical constituency unfortunately still prone to unreconstructed anti-Catholicism” (Thinking Faith). In fact, as I was doing this segment of these comments/reflections, I ran across a perfect example of this kind of thing in Cruxnow (Associated Press, “Politics: NH [New Hampshire] lawmaker who backs Trump calls pope the ‘Antichrist,’” <http://www.cruxnow.com/life/2016/02/22/nh-lawmaker-who-backs-trump-calls-pope-the-...>, February 22, 2016).

“A New Hampshire state lawmaker and Donald Trump supporter says she was not referring to Trump’s spat with the Pope when she called the Pope the Antichrist on her Facebook page. [During the Pope’s Mexican visit, he was asked a question about Trump’s desire/intention to build a wall along the United States’ southern border with Mexico to keep out illegal immigrants; in his response, the Pope stated that anyone who would want to build such a wall would not be called a ‘Christian’ but he did not mention Trump by name. Scinto.] The comment by Republican Representative Susan DeLemus, of Rochester [New Hampshire], came Thursday [February 18, 2016] shortly after the Pope said anyone who wants to build a wall along the United States-Mexico border, as Trump wants to do, is ‘not Christian.’ DeLemus wrote, “The Pope is the anti-Christ. Do your research,’ after someone posted on her page asking if she’d seen the Pope’s comments. DeLemus, reached Monday [February 22, 2016], says she was referring to her long-held beliefs regarding the papacy and not reacting to what the Pope said about Trump. She follows a Christian doctrine called Sola Scriptura [‘only the Scriptures’] that considers the Bible the supreme authority.” (Associated Press)

Beyond some Evangelicals/Fundamentalists, “the attribution of conspiratorial intentions to the Pope also characterises a surprise number of Catholic sources other than the ‘usual suspects,’ i.e., confirmed enemies of Vatican II. These vary from the overtly defiant, such as the well-known Italian journalist Antonio Succi (whose 2014 book Non è Francesco [roughly translated as There is No Francis] openly proclaimed Pope Francis’ election to have been technically illegitimate) or Franciscan Brother Alexis Bugnolo’s blog From Rome, to the more subtly disgruntled pronouncements of the doggedly conservative Rorate-Caeli or the widely-followed Lifesitenews. Nor are Catholic commentators embedded within mainstream media immune to viewing the Pope as a ‘plotter’, as was recently demonstrated by the acrimonious dispute between many American Catholic academics and New York Times columnist Ross Douthat following the publication of his October 17, 2015, article entitled ‘The Plot to Change Catholicism’ during the Synod on the Family. I leave it to others to tackle the rights and wrongs of the ongoing spat between Douthat and his critics, but I would like to highlight some more general questions needing to be asked regarding this intensifying anti-Papal backlash and the unprecedented severity of its language. Why has this emerged now? What were the conditions of possibility for its emergence and – perhaps most intriguingly – why have Pope Francis’ detractors surfaced simultaneously in constituencies which at first glance would appear totally heterogeneous, but which find themselves in an ad hoc convergence whose very improbability requires explanation?” (Thinking Faith)

TO BE CONTINUED

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