

NO OTHER GOSPEL

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St. Paul begins most of his epistles by thanking God for His goodness toward the particular group of Christians to whom the epistle is addressed. But the epistle to the Galatians begins instead with an expression of dismay and a solemn warning. The Christians of Galatia are allowing themselves to be drawn away from the truth. They are to accept “no other Gospel” than the one they received from Paul.

It seems that after Paul had visited this region and preached the Gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, some other person or group, also claiming to be Christian, had tried to change the Gospel by adding to it the requirements of Jewish law, including circumcision. Paul says that anyone who thus tries to change the Gospel should be condemned. Christians are free from the requirements of the Jewish law; salvation is by faith, not by the works of the law.

How should we apply Paul’s message to our contemporary situation? What is the relevance of his warning for Christians of our day?

One plausible application might be as follows. Since our salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ, we are not saved by fulfilling man-made requirements, such as the obligation of Sunday Mass attendance or the requirements of the vow of priestly celibacy. Not even the demands of so-called “natural law” in matters such as contraception, fornication, abortion, divorce, and homosexuality are binding on Christians. Since man has come of age, he must be completely free to live his own life in his own way. The Pope and the rest of the bishops should not try to impose obligations on Christians, for each individual must be free in all things to follow the inspiration of his own individual conscience. Moreover, faith in dogmatic formulae of past ages is faith misplaced. No Pope, no General Council, not even the books of the Bible itself can claim infallibility. Only God is infallible. The Christian is saved only by faith in Jesus Christ. Catholics have made the mistake of adding to this original, simple Gospel elements that amount to idolatry of the Bible, of the Church, of the Pope, of Catholic dogmas, of the Mass, of the Virgin Mary, of natural law, and of traditions originated not by God but by men.

I say that this application of St. Paul’s warning is plausible, because it is seriously proposed by theologians and publicists who consider themselves Catholics, and who claim to be carrying forward a renewal of the Church “in the spirit of Vatican II.” Tonight I wish to outline an argument for the position that this application of St. Paul’s warning is erroneous, and that the “other Gospel” threatening Christian faith today is to be characterized quite differently than it is by the self-styled “progressives.”

Let us begin by affirming with St. Paul that our salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ. This faith must be a commitment of our whole selves to the whole being of Christ. Faith here can be no mere acceptance of impersonal dogmas.

True enough. But as His Eminence, Cardinal O'Boyle pointed out so well in his keynote address last evening, Christ is the *Incarnate* Word of God. And to Christ it belongs not only to be a person but also as man to be a bodily reality. Such is the condition of every man, and Christ shared the human condition in all things save sin, as St. Paul teaches.

Because of his material reality, a man can never be a mature and fully actualized person unless he articulates his own self-understanding and self-commitment. We express our self-understanding and self-commitment in statements we make about ourselves, when we say who we are and what our lives mean to us.

My wife, for example, says that she loves me and that she takes me for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health until death. These expressions of hers are not detachable from her personhood, insofar as she is a human person—that is, a bodily person. My faith in my wife cannot dismiss her self-revelation in words and in deeds, for these words and these deeds are included in the reality of her human personhood. It would be utter nonsense if I were to say that I have faith in my wife but that I am uncertain whether she loves me or not, or whether she really meant it when twenty years and ten days ago she pronounced the words of the marriage vow.

The same thing is true in our relationship to Christ. He identifies Himself to us as the Son of God, as the Christ, as one who came that we may have life, as one who sends the Spirit to teach us all truth, as one who founds the Church on Peter, as one who has and confers the power to forgive sins, as one who remains with us in the Blessed Sacrament, as one who sends the disciples to teach all nations, as one whose commands perfect the law of Moses, as one who will stay with us until the end of time, as one who will come again in glory on the last day, as one who will judge the living and the dead.

Some Scripture scholars and new theologians, who are imbued with naturalistic presuppositions, find the Jesus Christ of the Gospels a scandal to the a priori requirements of their methodology. He is remarkably articulate about who He is and what He is doing in life. Surely few people even in our self-conscious age have expressed so well in words and deeds the concept they have of themselves. Christ's self-articulation surely is unprecedented in the literature of ancient times. Yet the propositional expression of oneself is an appropriate feature of the mature human being.

If we reflect upon the dogmas of the Catholic faith, it is easy to see that they are nothing but a restatement of Christ's own self-understanding and self-commitment. In this way we can understand very concretely what it means to say that Christ Himself is the complete revelation of God. Insofar as Christ is truly human, it is nonsense to say that we have faith in Him if we do not believe His own expression of Himself. Hence we see that saving faith,

which is faith in Christ alone, must embrace faith in dogmatic formulae, precisely because saving faith is faith in Jesus Christ, who is truly human, and who therefore must express and communicate Himself to us in words and deeds.

Furthermore, the genuineness of the humanity of Jesus grounds the legitimacy of the Church and her claims. Human nature does not permit a person to be complete in isolation; we are fully human only insofar as we are members of communities. We live our human lives as members of one another, and we humans could not be persons except through our membership in one another. So the Incarnation of the Word is not completed in one man, Jesus, but only in His human solidarity, which includes bodily solidarity, with others, who are His mystical body, the Church. And we individually find Christ—or, better, He finds us individually—only in the Church, through her teaching, through her sacraments, through her government. Fully to accept the Incarnation is to accept the Church, for in the Church the Word of God completes His incarnation by human solidarity with sinful men.

In his recent book on infallibility, Hans Küng denies the infallibility of the bishops, of the pope, of general councils, of the Church itself, and even of the Bible. Only God is infallible, says Küng. We may grant that only God is infallible by virtue of Himself. But we must wonder: What is a divine infallibility that has no way of communicating itself to us—except, perhaps, inconsistently by Hans Küng’s private revelation? Someone should mention to Küng that God is really incarnate, and that the Incarnate Word who did not greedily cling to His divine condition is not loath to share with His human brothers some of His divine qualities.

The Church lives. There is no infallible truth in the Bible if the Bible is nothing but a bundle of writings to be dealt with by merely human scholarship and to be used and abused by anyone. When it suits their purposes, Satan and Küng quote Scripture. But the Bible interpreted and taught by the living Church contains an irreplaceable treasure—the words and deeds of God present with us. The Bible giving us the “Word of the Lord” in the living Church teaches us infallible truth.

And if there is any infallibility at all in the divine truth which is taught to us in the living Church, then there must be infallibility in certain definite statements made by certain definite persons on certain definite occasions. We are human beings, bodily persons. Truth can only be communicated to us and received by us in particular bits of discourse, in particular sentences that we hear. “Faith is by hearing.”

Only God is infallible by virtue of Himself. But God does speak to us when Christ speaks. And Christ speaks to us when those He has sent speak. “He who hears you, hears me.” Christ took the risk of complete incarnation: “As the Father has sent me, so I also send you.” Thus He established a living human office having the power to make judgments characterized by the divine attribute of infallibility. Clearly, the claim of such a power was already made by the apostolic Church, which decided who was a true prophet and who a

false one, who was a true teacher and who a false one, who was inspired by the Spirit of Christ and who moved by the other spirit. “It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us ...” claims no less than does Paul VI, when he wrote *Humanae vitae*.

I suppose that Hans Küng would say—if he is going to be consistent he must say—that the apostolic claim is just as false as the papal claim. The apostles can no more commit the Holy Spirit than can their successors—excuse me, I forgot momentarily that Küng denies that the bishops are the successors of the apostles. He prefers to say that the entire Church is apostolic, for in this way he can reach the conclusion that the only competent teachers in the Church are not the bishops, not the Pope, but the theologians! The traditional view that the Incarnation has so far succeeded that some attributes of God can be said to belong to the Church has often been called “triumphalism” in recent years. Küng rejects the triumphalism of the claim that God can communicate and has communicated a share in His own infallibility to men. Küng even modestly denies that theologians are infallible. He only wishes to claim that they, or the best or them, or at least one really outstanding theologian whom Küng knows well, are less fallible than bishops, popes, general councils, and sacred Scripture. Ah, this boyish looking Swiss theologian—what honesty, what frankness, what sincerity, what modesty, what humility, what scholarship!

Recently a document was published by the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, over the signature of John Cardinal Wright, concerned with art treasures and precious objects in the custody of priests. Those who have care of such things are solemnly warned not to alienate them, on pain of the censures provided in Canon Law, which as I understand to include excommunication. We may hope that Cardinal Wright’s curial colleague, Cardinal Seper, who heads up the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, will be sensitive to the anomaly involved in a situation such that if a priest sacristan disposes of some bits of unused jewelry to finance a bottle or two of good cheer he is liable to find himself cast into exterior darkness while a priest-theologian who disposes of Catholic doctrine as if its truth-value were a cut below that of *Alice in Wonderland*—or, better, *Hansel and Gretel*—remains in a position where he can claim to be a Catholic priest and theologian in good standing. Of course, sophisticated Catholics may realize that the alienation of precious goods involved in stealing jewelry is much easier to detect, to prove, to judge, and to punish than is the alienation of precious goods involved in stealing clarity and certainty from Catholic doctrine. But no one should blame less sophisticated Catholics if they begin to wonder whether the Pope and the bishops are not sure of their ground against Küng, or if, being sure of their ground, the Holy See nevertheless is more concerned about jewelry than it is about Catholic doctrine. I do not suggest that such an idea would be justified, but only that it would not be blameworthy.

Catholic doctrine includes, among other things, a very definite understanding of man. Man is created in the image of God. The meaning of human life is its openness to a share in

divine life. Man's personality includes his body; matter is not created by some principle of evil, but by the only good God.

From a few such truths we could easily begin to unfold traditional Catholic moral teaching, especially the teaching concerning respect for human life and reverence for human sexuality. In fact, His Eminence, Cardinal O'Boyle, gave some indications in his address last evening how this derivation of moral teaching from basic doctrine might be carried out.

A Christian understanding of human nature is included in divine revelation itself. That is why the Church teaches a morality of natural law. The precepts of natural law taught by the Church are not based upon human nature as it is understood by Aristotle or Plato, by the Stoics or the Gnostics, by René Descartes or Karl Marx, by Charles Darwin or Sigmund Freud, by John Dewey or John Paul Sartre. The precepts of the natural law taught by the Catholic Church are based upon human nature as it is revealed to us in the light of faith, as it becomes visible to us in Christ. The law of Christ assumes the moral law based upon human nature into itself just as the Person of Christ assumes human nature into Himself.

For example, the equality of divine persons in the Blessed Trinity implies that human persons, who are made in God's image and who are called to share in His divinity, also are equal to one another. The model of the Blessed Trinity points to the right structure of human relationships—*not*, the individual or the community; but both maximum individuality and the closest community. Human persons must strive to increase both their individual identities and their social bonds, sacrificing neither one to the other, just as the divine persons are most perfectly diverse and yet most perfectly one in the single reality of God. As God is love, so must true human love lead neither to individualism nor to collectivism, but to the most intimate community of persons who remain free, who remain equal, who remain more than cogs in the social machine or cells in the totalitarian mass society.

Much of the social doctrine of the Church from Leo XIII to Paul VI--and I am thinking particularly of Pope Paul's recent Apostolic Letter in which both individualistic and collectivist ideologies were rejected—can be derived quite easily from these elementary considerations. Similar reflection would show how the Church's teaching on other moral questions, including contraception and abortion, follows from human nature understood in the light of faith.

Even those obligatory Catholic practices, such as Mass attendance on Sunday and the celibacy of the clergy, which do not in themselves follow necessarily from Christian faith, can be seen as legitimate requirements of faith in Christ, not as arbitrary impositions of mere human authority. For such matters must be decided one way or another, and the bodily conditions of human life rule out the possibility that everything should be determined with rational necessity, while the conditions of human community rule out the possibility that free, individual discretion can be allowed to reign supreme whenever rational necessity cannot determine an issue.

Even in civil society, someone must decide whether we drive on the right or on the left, and there is nothing arbitrary about the decision, even if no necessary reason can be given for it. So much the less should we find legalism in the judgment that we shall offer Mass on Sunday together or authoritarianism in the decision that individuals who lack the gift of celibacy should not be accepted for ordination in the Latin rite of the Church. Other judgments than these certainly could be made, but these judgments are fitting, and they should be respected even as the wishes of Christ would be, by Catholics who really believe in the fullness of the Incarnation.

The “other Gospel” against which Catholics must be warned today, then, is not correctly identified by the self-styled “progressives” in the Church. In fact, I think that the other Gospel which must be carefully excluded is precisely that secularism which obviously underlies the outlook of those who wish to revise essentially the Roman Catholicism of that Holy Mother Church from whom we received our Christian faith and in whom our Christian life has always been nurtured.

Renewal of the Church sanctioned by the Pope and the other Bishops is one thing. Revolution against essentials is another.

Authorized adaptations in the liturgy should be accepted; no one should permit affection for older forms to interfere with wholehearted acceptance of newer ones, once they are authorized. But revisions of rites that are not authorized, especially revisions that implicitly deny the sacred meaning of the Mass and of the other sacraments, must be rejected.

Orderly changes in Church laws should be welcomed by all Catholics. Man does live in history, and former practices of fasting, of the garb of religious, of the granting of dispensations, and so on were not essential, even though they were good for their time. But the reduction of ecclesiastical authority to near slave-status, in the name of a ministry of service and the “freedom of the children of God,” is an aberration that I cannot imagine St. Paul would ever have condoned.

The Baltimore Catechism was a good educational tool in its time, but it is no longer adequate. But this does not mean that the teaching of the Church should be displaced in the formation of Catholic youth by recent social science, or by political and social propaganda, or by new theologies which try in vain to make Christianity relevant to those who have lost—or even to those who never had—Christian faith.

No one is likely to tell you today, as the Judaizers told St. Paul’s Galatians, that your salvation hangs on circumcision and on fulfilling the precepts of the Mosaic law. But someone is likely to tell you that your salvation hangs on not fathering or mothering excess babies, on not polluting the atmosphere, on not eating grapes picked by non-unionized workers, on not sending your children to *de facto* segregated schools, or on not supporting the government’s Vietnam policy. Missing Mass on Sunday is a negligible fault; missing

a “peaceful demonstration” against whatever is being demonstrated against at the moment is a mortal sin.

This secular Gospel has considerable appeal and relevance. No one can deny the human value of some of these concerns and causes. And true Christianity cannot exclude any genuine human value.

I personally believe that the Vietnam war is morally unjustifiable. I believe that Christians should unite in opposing its continuation. I believe that the strategy of nuclear deterrence is morally unjustifiable, and that we should cease to engage in this horrible strategy regardless of the consequences for world politics, because the end simply does not justify the means. I believe that racial discrimination is considerably more widespread than most middle-class Catholics are willing to admit. I believe that the condition of migrant workers is miserable, and that their misery is a direct result of unjust exploitation. I believe that much of what we now call the “ecology problem” is a consequence of grave abuses of social responsibility by individuals and corporations greedily seeking maximum profits without regard to the common good.

I could add at length to these examples. You would see that my political-social-economic view is quite far to the left—just as, I might say, the political-social-economic view of John XXIII, Vatican II, and Paul VI is quite far to the left.

It is worth recalling that it was a conservative layman who responded to one of Pope John’s encyclicals with the smart-alecky remark: “Mater, si; magistra, no!” I deplored that attitude just as much as I later deplored the attitude of the so-called theologians who usurped the pastoral office of the Pope and the Bishops by advising Catholic married couples to disregard the teaching of *Humanae vitae* in favor of a judgment formed on the basis of the “theologians’” own opinion of the morality of contraception.

I therefore reject the secular Gospel, not because it is wholly pernicious as a political-social-economic program, but because it separates human values from faith in Christ. Once this separation is carried out, the secular Gospel easily incorporates attitudes and practices which violate the integrity of the human person—such as the anti-life movement, such as excessive respect for individual freedom, such as excessive confidence in government planning, such as the drug culture, such as nuclear deterrent strategy, such as “non-violent” violent demonstrations, and so on.

Our task as Catholics is to ground our understanding of human values in our saving faith in Christ, to respond to the grace of Christ, which is always sufficient, so that our faith will be fruitful in works of love, and thus to present to unbelievers and to those whose faith is weak a bright image of hope. If the truth of the Incarnation can become visible in us, then others may hope that an ardent and efficacious love of human goods in this world will be a true sacrament or that love of God which always longs for fulfillment in heavenly joy.