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# Theopolitical Imagination: What Can We Learn From the Postconciliar Church?

## *Imaginación teopolítica: ¿Qué podemos aprender de la iglesia posconciliar?*

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Abstract

The aftermath of the Second Vatican Council saw the emergence of theopolitical imagination defending both radical conservative and progressive views. This article studies two such experiments, namely, Marcel Lefebvre's rejection of the Council and liberation theology's yearning for a solution, here and now, of poverty, understood as a sign of the Kingdom. I assert that both examples share a fundamental insight, that is, its yearning for a re-politicization of the church, a confusion between the immanent and transcendent axis of human existence. I suggest that what the church experienced in the 1960s is analogous to our political situation, where citizens are increasingly disappointed with democracies, and are thus siding with radical populist politics that use religious language to justify their programs.

**Keywords:** immanentism, authoritarianism, transcendence, Second Vatican Council, radicalism.

Resumen

Los años posteriores al Concilio Vaticano II vieron una explosión de imaginación teopolítica defendiendo posturas radicales tanto conservadoras como progresistas. Este artículo estudia dos de estos experimentos, a saber, el rechazo del Concilio por parte de Marcel Lefebvre y el anhelo de la teología de la liberación de una solución, aquí y ahora, de la pobreza, entendida como signo del Reino. Afirmo que ambos ejemplos comparten una idea fundamental, a saber, su anhelo de una repolitización de la iglesia, una confusión entre el eje inmanente y trascendente de la existencia humana. Sugiero que lo que la iglesia experimentó en la década de 1960 es análogo a nuestra situación política, en la que los ciudadanos están

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cada vez más decepcionados con las democracias, y por ello se ponen del lado de políticas populistas radicales que utilizan el lenguaje religioso para justificar sus programas.

**Palabras clave:** inmanentismo, autoritarismo, trascendencia, Concilio Vaticano II, radicalismo.

## 1. Introduction

The world's political scene increasingly shows signs of radicalization. The years of democratic hegemony are long gone, and we find ourselves caught in radical politics, either from the right—with xenophobic and even racist groups occupying the center of democratic discussions in the rich West—or from the left, where anti-system leaders in countries dominated by inequality and poverty have turned on the old propaganda machine, fostering resented politics and antagonism. Democracy faces a deep legitimacy crisis; at one extreme, technocracy alienates the citizens from their authorities, while at the other extreme the dream of an unmediated political representation of the "people" emerges as the only viable political solution. In the end, what we have lost is the ability to communicate with the other, preferring the seemingly cozier alternative provided by social media and the post-truth society, namely, to stick to our ideas, surrounding ourselves of like-minded peers, who are just as radicalized and reluctant of even considering alternative arguments than us, forming what Gilles Lipovetsky calls "collective narcissism".

The present work proposes that the postconciliar crisis in the late sixties of the past century is an interesting place for studying radical politics. I study two reactions to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). First, I look at Marcel Lefebvre's rejection of the council, accusing it of giving up good orthodoxy in the name of a modernizing, protestant-like, liberal turn of the church. I suggest that Lefebvre's critique, though accurate about certain misinterpretations and blatant exaggerations that followed the council's optimism, ended up yearning for the return of Christendom, that is, of the theopolitical project that bathed the Catholic church with power for a thousand years. Then I analyze Gustavo Gutiérrez's liberation theology, suggesting that, rather than a return to the past, his doctrine is informed by an anxiety for results which, being born out of an honest concern for the poor, ended up flirting with an undue immanentization of the Kingdom, erasing the eschatological gulf and hoping for an ideal society that Christian doctrine rejects as impossible.

The work aims at showing interesting parallelisms between the highly politicized postconciliar church and the highly religious populist politics, showing that both rest on a simplistic recourse to utopianism—founded ei-

ther on the glorious past or, on the contrary, on a liberating future, here on earth, where pain and suffering will finally end. Seen in this light, I propose that the yearning for a materialized utopia is condemned to failure, at best, or to the actualization of a hellish reality, at worst.

## 2. Marcel Lefebvre: Nostalgia for the good-old days

From the very start of the council, one bishop felt that the road the Church was taking was the wrong one. Born in 1905, Marcel Lefebvre saw the council as a liberal-modernist conspiracy to take down the true Church of Christ. Disappointed with its results, he quickly rejected Vatican II, on the basis that it contravened the solid Catholic doctrine of the past two centuries. This false Catholicism, he asserted, overenthusiastically embraced modernity and the spirit of the French Revolution.[2] In 1988, John Paul II excommunicated Lefebvre for ordaining a bishop without papal consent.[3] In 2009, Benedict XVI lifted this excommunication, after a process of dialogue with Lefebvre's Society of Saint Pius X.[4]

Lefebvre, to be sure, never wanted to leave the Catholic church—although his excessive zeal and ultraconservatism led him, in the end, to reject the very church he was trying to defend. He worried about, and correctly denounced, the excesses committed during the implementation of Vatican II. He reacted, for example, against "an American bishop who recommends little cakes containing milk, baking-powder, honey and margarine"[5] to replace the communion wafer. The—perhaps excessive—desire to bring the faithful closer to God was misunderstood in some places, replacing this closeness with casualness, "as if we were dealing with Him as equals".[6] Lefebvre lamented how the excessive encounter of the liturgy with the modern world—e.g., in the incorporation of secular music and the relaxation of devotion—did away with the sense of the sacred: "The loss of what is sacred leads also to sacrilege… A Mass took place during which the band-girls danced and some of them then distributed the communion".[7]

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[2] Joseph Ratzinger claims that *Gaudium et spes,* viewed as an *Antisyllabus,* "expresses the attempt of an official reconciliation of the Church with the new age established in 1789". Ratzinger, J., *Teoría de los Principios Teológicos. Materiales para una Teología Fundamental*, Barcelona: Herder, 1984, p. 458.

[3] See Canon §1382 of the *Code of Canon Law.* Available at https://bit.ly/3ytgwwU.

[4] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: "Decree remitting the excommunication '*latae sententiae*' of the bishops of the Society of St. Pius X". The Holy See. Available at https://bit.ly/3Dxuxxl.

[5] Lefebvre, M., *Open Letter to Confused Catholics*, Herefordshire: Fowler Wright Books Ltd, 1986, p. 26.

[6] Lefebvre, M., *Open Letter*…, 17.

[7] Lefebvre, M., *Open Letter*…, 25.

Lefebvre saw the post-conciliar crisis as an unequivocal sign that the council itself had been a mistake.[8] For him, the solution was a radical one: the baby had to be thrown out along with the bath water. The bishop thus went beyond a critique of the excesses made by a misunderstanding of the spirit of the council, deeming these outlandish behaviors as the *necessary* consequence of a council that had betrayed the church. In the preface to his book, *J'accuse le Concile,* Lefebvre affirms that "Liberal and Modernist tendencies came to light during the Council and had an overwhelming influence on those present, because of a veritable conspiracy of the Cardinals from the banks of the Rhine, unfortunately supported by Pope Paul VI".[9] And in his "Profession of Faith", he proclaimed:

> We refuse and have always refused to follow the Rome of neo-modernist and neo-Protestant tendencies which clearly manifested themselves in the Second Vatican Council and after the Council in all the reforms which issued from it. All these reforms, indeed, have contributed and are still contributing to the demolition of the Church, to the ruin of the priesthood, to the annihilation of the sacrifice and sacraments, to the disappearance of religious life, to a naturalistic and Teilhardian type of teaching in Universities, seminaries and catechesis, a teaching which is the fruit of liberalism and Protestantism and many times condemned by the solemn Magisterium of the Church.[10]

Vatican II, in Lefebvre's opinion, embraced the ideals of the French Revolution. He saw the triad of values, "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*", reflected in Vatican II's triad "religious liberty, collegiality, ecumenism". He took issue with the council's assertion that it is "only in freedom that people can turn themselves towards what is good" (*Gaudium et spes*, §17), and that religious liberty[11] derives from human dignity (*Dignitatis humanae* §1, 2).

[8] "Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre's schismatic movement involved an internal incoherence. He sought to appeal to earlier councils in order to discredit Vatican II. But that which guarantees the truth of the teaching of one council guarantees the truth of them all". McInerny, R., *What Went Wrong with Vatican II. The Catholic Crisis Explained,* Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 1998, p. 33.

[9] Lefebvre, M., *I Accuse the Council,* Dickinson: The Angelus Press, 1982, p. vii. For a discussion of the bishops "from the banks of the Rhine" see Wiltgen, R., *The Rhine flows into the Tiber,* New York: Hawthorn Books, 1967.

[10] Reproduced in Congar, Y., *Challenge to the Church. The case of Archbishop Lefebvre,* London: Collins, 1976, p. 77.

[11] In his exposition of his sixth intervention at the council, Lefebvre explained that "No subject came under such intense discussion as that of 'religious liberty,' probably because none interested the traditional enemies of the Church so much. It is the major aim of Liberalism. Liberals, Masons and Protestants are fully aware that by this means they can strike at the very heart of the Catholic Church; in making her accept the common law of secular societies, they would thus reduce her to a mere sect like the others and even cause her to disappear". Lefebvre, M., *I Accuse the Council,* p. 26.

Against, religious liberty, Lefebvre affirmed that "the foundation of liberty is truth, not dignity".[12] Adopting a correspondence theory of truth, he asserted that it is only when our will is in line with Christ, the Truth incarnated, that we experience our dignity. From this perspective, it becomes clear that "religious liberty cannot be applied to false religions".[13] Why would we grant rights to error? Would not that imply, necessarily, the tacit renunciation of truth altogether? Reluctant to dress mistake—and all non-Catholic religions, including post-Vatican II heresy, were for him mistaken—with the garments of freedom, Lefebvre praised cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani's original schema on "Religious Toleration", a text that "covered seven pages of text and sixteen pages of references, from Pius VI (1790) to John XXIII (1959)".[14] This is a central point: toleration creates an unbridgeable gulf between the only true religion and the rest of them, denying the possibility for grace to be found outside the church: "No grace in the world, no grace in the history of humanity is distributed except through her".[15] Lefebvre was here attacking that solid and stable doctrine he thought to be defending. In denying grace outside the church, he uttered a doctrine condemned by Clement XI's Dogmatic Constitution *Unigenitus*, given in 1713.[16]

The principle of collegiality, for Lefebvre, was a direct attack on the monarchical character of the church, transforming the pope into "no more than a *primus inter pares*".[17] This emphasis on the collegial nature of the magisterium was, according to Lefebvre, part of a more ambitious project, namely, the democratization of the church:

> Democratisation of the magisterium is naturally followed by democratisation of Church government. Modern ideas being what they are, it has been still easier here to obtain the desired result, carrying these ideas over into the Church by means of the slogan of "collegiality". The Church's government had to be "collegialised": the Pope's power must be shared with an episcopal college, the government of each bishop with a priest's college, and the parish should share the running of his parish with councils and assemblies.[18]

[12] Lefebvre, M., *Open Letter…*, p. 83.
[13] Lefebvre, M., *Open Letter…*, p. 84.
[14] Lefebvre, M., *Open Letter…*, p. 84.
[15] Lefebvre, M., *Open Letter…*, p.80.
[16] The principle *nulla salus extra ecclesiam*, adopted by the council of Florence-Ferrara, must be understood, according to Ratzinger, on the background of an "ancient world image" which assumed the predominance of Christianity. Moreover, the proposition was meant as a condemnation of Jansen's rigorism. The church condemned the idea that "outside of the church there is no grace" in the Dogmatic Constitution *Unigenitus,* in 1713. Ratzinger, J., *El nuevo pueblo de Dios,* Barcelona: Herder, 1972, pp. 383-5.
[17] Lefebvre, M., *Open Letter…*, p. 64; Lefebvre, M., *I Accuse the Council,* p. 47.
[18] "The Snares of 'Collegialism'", reproduced in Eppstein, J., *Has the Catholic Church gone mad?*, New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1971, p. 39.

The Second Vatican Council's doctrine on episcopacy and primacy is contained in the third chapter of the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* (*LG*). It is telling that the discussion is framed not in terms of political authority, but as the correct interpretation of Jesus' instructions to the apostles. Jesus appointed the twelve to be shepherds of His Church, "at the head of which he placed Peter" (*LG* §18). Peter is one of the twelve, not distinct from the apostolic college. The council affirms that a bishop's authority comes from "divine authority" (*LG* §20) and that he is endowed with a "special outpouring of the holy Spirit" (*LG* §21). However, the exercise of episcopal authority demands *communion*, that is, the bishop's authority is only effective as a member of the college. As for the specific relationship between the pope and the bishops, the council states that

> The college or body of bishops has no authority… other than the authority which it is acknowledged to have in union with the Roman Pontiff… [who] has full, supreme and universal power over the whole church, a power which he can always exercise freely. The order of bishops is the successor to the college of the apostles… Together with its head, the Supreme Pontiff, and never apart from him, it is the subject of supreme and full authority over the universal church; but this power cannot be exercised without the consent of the Roman Pontiff (*LG* §22).

In trying to unpack this relationship, we turn to Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger. Rahner claims that the church is not a democracy established by men, "but one whose fundamental rights, duties and powers were established by God".[19] On the other hand, neither is it a monarchy; the pope is not a king, inasmuch as his will "is limited by a reality which… belongs to the constitution of the Church, the episcopate".[20] Now, how to understand the tension between papal primacy and the episcopal college as a divine, indissoluble institution? The answer, for Rahner, is found in the local church. It is there that the church becomes an "event"[21] and acquires tangibility not as an institution, but as *communion,* "as a plurality of men bound together by a visible occurrence and united by grace".[22] It is only in the local church as

[19] Rahner, K.; Ratzinger, J., *The Episcopate and the Primacy*, New York: Herder & Herder 1962, p. 12. Cf. Ratzinger, J.; Maier, H., *¿Democracia en la Iglesia?,* Madrid: San Pablo, 2005, pp. 22-30.
[20] Rahner, K.; Ratzinger, J., *The Episcopate and the Primacy*, p. 16.
[21] "An *event* indicates a moment (in time) when the conscious subject has been taken hold of by something independent (or other) than itself, even if this 'other' is occasioned by one's own actions… of the subject in relation to the very deeds which he or she has authored." In his view, "the shift in Catholic theology towards language of *act* and *event* signalled a relationship to 'existentialism,' which, taken broadly, entailed an emphasis upon subjectivity and freedom uncharacteristic of the focus upon objectivity common to neo-Scholastic thought". Olsen, C., "Act and Event in Rahner and von Balthasar: A Case Study in Catholic Systematics", *New Blackfriars,* 89 [1019]: 3-21, 2008, pp. 9-10.
[22] Rahner, K.; Ratzinger, J., *The Episcopate and the Primacy*, p. 25.

"event" that the universal church is manifested. The tension, thus, confronts primacy, which exists insofar as the church is *a* church, that is, for the purpose of unity, with the rights of the episcopate, which are granted because it is in the local church that the universal church acquires visibility. In addition, there is "a 'charismatic' structure in the Church besides the hierarchical",[23] an idea that reaffirms that the church is neither a monarchy nor a parliament.[24] The church recognizes the freedom with which God acts upon the community of faithful, which implies the necessity of pluralism on two levels: first, in the episcopacy as a collective body, and then in the church as the people of God, among the faithful (through different "charismas"; cf. John 3:8).

As for the understanding of authority in the church, Rahner affirms that the authority of the pope over individual bishops is not the same as the power he has over the collegiate episcopacy. This is because "[t]he pope's primacy is *primacy in the college*".[25] For Rahner, this clarifies the claim that "supreme authority of the Church rests in the council".[26] insofar as the council cannot exist without the pope as its head.

Relying on an image by Heribert Schauf, Ratzinger describes the church "not like a circle, with a single centre, but like an ellipse with two foci, primacy and episcopacy".[27] This image gives more dynamism to the relationship than the one we would get from a hastily adopted unity. This dialectic is already visible in the name "Roman Catholic". At first sight, a contradiction emerges between universality and particularity. A church whose self-understanding demands it to go to every corner of the world and speak to each in its own language (Acts 2:6) seems to be contradicted by the emphasis on the Roman element.[28] This tension produces, in the same way that in Rahner, a positive understanding of the church: "'Roman Catholic' expresses the pregnant dialectic between primacy and episcopate, neither of which exists without the other".[29]

Finally, ecumenism was attacked as the fertile soil for indifferentism: "Doubts on the necessity of the Catholic church as the only true religion, the sole source of salvation, emanating from the declarations on ecumenism and religious liberty, are destroying the authority of the church's Magisterium. In

[23] Rahner, K.; Ratzinger, J., *The Episcopate and the Primacy*, p. 31.
[24] "The council is not a parliament and the bishops are not congressmen whose task is given only and exclusively by those who have chosen them. The bishops don't represent the people, but Christ, from whom they receive their mission and consecration". Ratzinger, J., *El nuevo pueblo de Dios,* p. 188.
[25] Rahner, H. *et al*., *The Church. Readings in theology,* New York: P.J. Kennedy & Sons, 1963, p. 41.
[26] Rahner, H. *et al*., *The Church…*, p. 41.
[27] Rahner, K.; Ratzinger, J., *The Episcopate and the Primacy*, p. 43.
[28] See Ratzinger, J., *El nuevo pueblo de Dios,* p. 144.
[29] Ratzinger, J., *El nuevo pueblo de Dios,* p. 62.

fact, Rome is no longer the unique and necessary *Magistra Veritatis"*.[30] However, nowhere did Vatican II renounce Catholic exclusivism—as, e.g., in *LG* §13, 14 and 39. We are confronted again with the problem of truth: Lefebvre is right when he reminds us of the intimate connection between Christ, freedom, and truth—for "the truth will make you free" (Jn 8:32). Where was, if anywhere, his mistake? Yves Congar provides us with an answer: "As far as [Lefevbre] is concerned, he is the one to judge what is admissible and what is heretical or false and therefore to be rejected by fidelity to 'the Church as she has always been.'"[31] His insistence on finding Vatican II at fault and heretical led him to overlook the tensions inherent in its documents, as well as its continuity not only with the two centuries immediately prior to it but, more importantly, with the whole Christian tradition. Lefebvre's sources cover only the two (anti-liberal) centuries prior to the council, pretty much disregarding the rest of the church's long history. For instance, one can easily put Gregory XVI's harsh words against modernity, expressed in his encyclical letter, *Mirari vos* (1832), in Lefebvre's lips:

> Depravity exults; science is impudent; liberty, dissolute. The holiness of the sacred is despised; the majesty of divine worship is not only disapproved by evil men but defiled and held up to ridicule. Hence sound doctrine is perverted, and errors of all kinds spread boldly. The laws of the sacred, the rights, institutions, and discipline—none are safe from the audacity of those speaking evil (§5).

But it is perhaps in Lefebvre's understanding of the role of the state in precluding the spread of false religions where we find the source of his anger. Here we see his argumentation becoming weaker as it goes, surrendering to the ideal of the strong *political* church that ruled over Christendom. Lefebvre anchors his political ideas in Leo XIII's great encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, which states that the goal of the state is not material, but "principally a moral good" (cf. §32). From this, he concludes that, since "the propagation of false ideas naturally exerts more influence upon the weakest, the least educated", then it is the role of the state to curb false ideas spread by other religions to *defend* those whose ignorance makes them weak. For, the bishop asks: "Who will challenge the duty of the State to protect the weak?"[32] Lefebvre gives no argument to link the notion that the state's goal is a moral one—an insight not originally Christian, as Plato and Aristotle's works attest—with the rather odd affirmation that in fighting against non-Catholic religions the state is but complying with its duty of protecting the weak and uneducated.

[30] Lefebvre, M., *I Accuse the Council*, p. 97.
[31] Congar, Y., *Challenge to the Church*…, p. 15.
[32] Lefebvre, M., *Open Letter*…, p. 85.

His bias towards the anti-modern Catholic church is an effect, I believe, of a deep-seated conviction, namely, that Christendom was not only a positive time for the church, but its most faithful materialization. Lefebvre does not hide his annoyance about the separation between church and state. Congar correctly identifies this problem in Lefebvre's reading of collegiality: the latter forgets that "[t]his is no longer a question of 'power,' but it remains, and always will remain, a question of responsibility… This has absolutely nothing to do with politics, but with Christian existence in the Church".[33] However, for Lefebvre political power is inseparable from the one true Catholic church:

> Pope John Paul II… deplored the Inquisition during his visit to Spain. But it is only the excesses of the Inquisition that are remembered. What is forgotten is that the Church, in creating the Holy Office (Sanctum Officium Inquisitionis), was fulfilling its duty in protecting souls and proceeded against those who were trying to falsify the Faith and thus endangering the eternal salvation of everyone. The Inquisition came to the help of the heretics themselves, just as one goes to the help of persons who jump into the water to end their lives.[34]

What Lefebvre had in mind was not only the preconciliar church. He yearned for the old authoritarian times. In a sermon given on August 29, 1976, Lefebvre praised General Videla's dictatorship in Argentina:

> Take the example of the Argentine Republic. What kind of a state was it in only two or three months ago? Complete anarchy… brigands killing to left and right, industries utterly ruined, factory-owners locked up or taken as hostages […]
> But now there is an orderly government which has principles, which has authority, which is starting to tidy things up, which is stopping brigands from killing other people; and the economy is actually starting to revive, and the workers have actually got work to do, and they can actually go home knowing that they are not going to be brained on the way by someone who wants to make them go on strike when they don't want to go on strike.[35]

Brian Sudlow exculpates Lefebvre's praise of a murderous regime stressing that his praise "reveals more a clumsy and unworldly naivety, blind to certain political realities, rather than politically extremist engagement".[36] The issue, however, is not whether Lefebvre supported political extremism, but what kind of social arrangement—what Claude Lefort calls *mise en scène*— he

[33] Lefebvre, M., *Open Letter…*, p. 39.
[34] Lefebvre, M., *Open Letter…*, p. 86. The bishop's view on the Spanish Inquisition echoes that of Joseph de Maistre. See his *Letters on the Spanish Inquisition.*
[35] Congar, Y., *Challenge to the Church…*, pp. 46-47.
[36] Sudlow, B., "The Frenchness of Marcel Lefebvre and the Society of St Pius X: A new reading", *French Cultural Studies, 28*(1), 2017, p. 84.

favored. To his question, the answer must be: one that resembles Christendom, that is, one where the form of society reflects the divine order, where the state's coercive arm is used in order to protect the interests of the one, true church, and at the same time invests political power with a divine sanction.

Lefebvre's attack on the postconciliar church was motivated by an honest dissatisfaction with the post-conciliar culture. This worry was shared, to be sure, by many other theologians—Joseph Ratzinger and Henri de Lubac included—who didn't conclude from this situation that the Second Vatican Council had betrayed the Church of Christ. It is important to note that an important aspect in Lefebvre's radicalism was its being theologico-politically oriented, materializing in the effort to bring back Christendom, to align secular and spiritual power again, and to bring the marriage between church and state back once again. We can see this in (1) his selective use of sources, joining the chorus of the anti-liberal church, while forgetting the rich and *diverse* tradition of the church; and (2) in his yearning for a return to the pre-disenchanted times, where the Catholic church reigned not only in the hearts of the believer, but also exerted its influence over every single subject in its jurisdiction, through legislation and the coercive capacity of the government.

## 3. Liberation theology: The transcendent-immanent tension of the Kingdom

The reactions to Vatican II came from conservatives who sought to preserve a church untouched by the modern age and progressives who believed that the council had only been the start of change. On the conservative camp, as we just saw, Marcel Lefebvre accused the council of heresy and the betrayal of the tradition of the church. On the progressivist side, the Dutch Catechism, published in 1968 under the leadership of Edward Schillebeeckx and Piet Schoonenberg, constitutes a landmark. The Catechism abandoned the old scholastic language and tried to speak in words accessible for the modern person. It embraced an anthropological and overtly phenomenological stance, in harmony with the new methods in historical exegesis. The document was, in the words of Ratzinger, "long overdue" in a Holland marked by a "ghetto mentality", where "in the year 1954 the Dutch episcopate forbade Catholics from becoming members of socialist parties, and anyone who read socialist newspapers or magazines regularly or attended meetings of such parties was denied the sacraments and had to face the threat of being refused Catholic burial".[37]

[37] Ratzinger, J., "The Dutch Catechism: A Theological Appreciation", *The Furrow, 22*(12), 1971, p. 741.

However, this first stage of optimism in the church's ability to insert itself in modernity and work with the secular world to solve the many problems of humanity was followed by deep disillusionment. This time, the criticism came from Latin America. The problem was not the encounter between the modern (European) world and the church, but from the awareness that a huge portion of the world had been hitherto forgotten. Latin American bishops and theologians' cry, *Nous accusons,* shook Europe: the reconciliation of the church with the world was not, and could not be, authentic until those without voice—the weak, the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized—those who Gustavo Gutiérrez calls the "nonpersons", were heard, defended, and done justice. Liberation theology was born as a *cri du cœur*, a reminder that a church that forgets the poor is a church that fails to live the message of Christ. This message sounds today as urgent—or perhaps even more so—than in 1971, when Gutiérrez's book, *A Theology of Liberation*, was first published.[38] In this section I limit myself to studying Gutiérrez's liberationism, which must not be understood as suggesting that this is the only, or the authoritative version of liberation theology, but rather one of its first, more powerful versions.

Contrary to Lefebvre's Society of St. Pius X, liberation theology didn't split from the church nor deny the authority of the magisterium. The movement has never been condemned, although a couple of church documents—*Libertatis nuntius* (1984) and *Libertatis conscientia* (1986)—suggested possible deviations or dangers in its postulates. Moreover, liberation theologians tried to make explicit the filial connection between their doctrines and the teachings of the church. The seminal works of liberation saw themselves as answering the call made in Vatican II to think these documents and transform their words into life in the different localities. The conferences of Latin American Bishops held in Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979), both emphasized the notion of the church's "preferential option for the poor", recalling Jesus' own words regarding the care for the weak and poor (cf. Mt 25:35-36, 40). John XXIII had himself affirmed that "the church is, and wants to be, the church of all and especially the church of the poor".[39]

The starting point of liberation theology is a critique of the primacy of orthodoxy over orthopraxis, that is, the idea that knowing what one must think or believe takes precedence over the practical knowledge about what to do. For Gutiérrez, "the goal is to balance and even to reject the primacy and almost exclusiveness this doctrine has enjoyed in Christian life and above all to modify the emphasis, often obsessive, upon the attainment of an ortho-

[38] Gutiérrez, G., *A Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988.
[39] Quoted in Gutiérrez, G., *A Theology of Liberation…,* p. xxvi.

doxy which is often nothing more than fidelity to an obsolete tradition or a debatable interpretation".[40] When Gutiérrez connects this idea with Hegel's claim that philosophy rises only at sundown, it is difficult not to perceive as well the influence of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it". Just as philosophy is always behind praxis, theology is a "reflection on practice in the light of faith".[41] In the words of Leonardo and Clodovis Boff:

> Before we can do theology we have to "do" liberation. The first step for liberation theology is pre-theological. It is a matter of trying to live the commitment of faith: in our case, to participate in some way in the process of liberation, to be committed to the oppressed… The essential point is this: links with specific practice are *at the root* of liberation theology. It operates within the great dialectic of theory (faith) and practice (love).[42]

Thus, liberation theology implies a new way of doing theology. This also means a new approach to the Bible. Liberation theologians pay attention to the many stories of oppression found in the Bible. The Exodus, for example, is relevant for its narrations of God's *liberation* of his people from the Egyptian yoke.[43] Liberation here means not only—or primarily—a liberation that will happen at the end of times, when those faithful to God will enjoy eternal blessedness. Israel was freed from oppression, hunger, depravity, and violence exerted by a powerful and cruel master.[44] In the same way, Jesus' salvific work cannot mean *only* eternal salvation. Although the kingdom of God will not be fulfilled until the afterlife, the seeds of it germinate and give

[40] Gutiérrez, G., *A Theology of Liberation…*, p. 8. This, however, does not necessarily mean that liberation theology advocates for the primacy of praxis. In the preface to the 1988 edition of his book, Gutiérrez advocated for a "circular relationship between the two" (Gutiérrez, G., *A Theology of Liberation…*, p. xxxiv). On this idea, *Libertatis Nuntius* (available in Spanish at: https://bit.ly/3tWL4pX) establishes that a "healthy theological method no doubt will always take the 'praxis' of the Church into account and will find there one of its foundations, but that is because that praxis comes from the faith and is a lived expression of it" (X.4; see also XI.13).

[41] Cited in Rowland, Ch., *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2007, p. 27. Confront this idea with Zöe Bennett's claim in the same book: "The basic model of liberation theology arises from a Marxist dialectical context and involves the movement from praxis to changed praxis" (p. 41).

[42] Boff, L.; Boff C., *Introducing Liberation Theology*, New York: Orbis Books, 1986, p. 22.

[43] Ratzinger suggests the danger of a politicized reading of Exodus. While "Christians had interpreted the Exodus of Israel from Egypt as a symbol (*typos*) of baptism and seen in baptism a radicalized and universalized Exodus… to the theologians of today the road from the Exodus to baptism seems to be a loss of reality, a retreat from the political-real into the mystical-unreal and the merely individual… Baptism is an introduction to the Exodus, i.e., a symbol of an act of political liberation to which the chosen 'people,' i.e., the oppressed of all lands, are called". Ratzinger, J., *Joseph Ratzinger in Communio, Vol. II,* Michigan: Eerdmans, 2013, p. 61. For a political reading of Exodus see Walzer, M., *Exodus and* Revolution, New York: Basic Books, 1985.

[44] Gutiérrez, G., *A Theology of Liberation…*, p. 88.

fruit in our own time.[45] Put in negative form, this means that "the existence of poverty represents a sundering both of solidarity among persons and also of communion with God. Poverty is an expression of a sin, that is, of a negation of love", which runs against the idea of the Kingdom.[46] Working for the cause of justice, that is, siding with the poor, the weak, and the forgotten against oppression, is the fundamental task of the church, because it is through the attainment of a more just society that the kingdom becomes visible. Gutiérrez endorses Schillebeeckx's understanding of the kingdom, which runs close to pure immanentism:

> [T]he true interpretation of the meaning revealed by theology is achieved only in historical praxis. "The hermeneutics of the Kingdom of God", observes Schillebeeckx, "consists especially in making the world a better place. Only in this way will I be able to discover what the Kingdom of God means". We have here a political hermeneutics of the Gospel.[47]

Siding with the poor necessarily means fighting against their oppressors. For liberation theology this means rejecting the system that has been designed to silence and marginalize the poor. Gutiérrez uses the term "class struggle" but rejects Marx's antagonism, which would betray the universality of the Christian message:

> The universality of Christian love is, I repeat, incompatible with the exclusion of any persons, but it is not incompatible with a preferential option for the poorest and most oppressed. When I speak of taking into account social conflict, including the existence of the class struggle, I am not denying that God's love embraces all without exception.[48]

Liberation theology thus appears as an original way of doing theology, which focuses on the need to take the church's "preferential option for the poor" seriously. An interesting characteristic of this way of theologizing is the careful balance between progressiveness and continuity. Every time liberation theology seems to be taking a step beyond the church's magisterial teachings, a quick counterbalance is suggested that restores its unity with the church. This is, in my opinion, its geniality, which is not free of dangers.

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[45] "[L]iberating praxis endeavors to transform history in the light of the reign of God. It accepts the reign now, even though knowing that it will arrive in its fullness only at the end of time". Gutiérrez, G., *A Theology of Liberation…*, p. xxx.

[46] Gutiérrez, G., *A Theology of Liberation…*, p. 168. Cf. Boff, L.; Boff C., *Introducing Liberation Theology*, p. 52.

[47] Gutiérrez, G., *A Theology of Liberation…*, p. 10-11.

[48] Gutiérrez, G., *A Theology of Liberation…*, p. 160. Boff and Boff transform Marx's famous claim, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles", as "the history of the struggles of the oppressed for their liberation is the history of the call of the Holy Spirit to the heart of a divided world" (Boff, L.; Boff C., *Introducing Liberation Theology*, p. 56).

Consider, for example, Gutiérrez's claim that "[o]nly a radical break from the status quo, that is, a profound transformation of the private property system, access to power of the exploited class, and a social revolution that would break this dependence would allow for the change to a new society, a socialist society".[49] The Marxian echoes are unmistakable here. However, throughout the whole work, Gutiérrez patiently qualifies this and other affirmations. As we saw, he distinguishes his political theology from Marxism, at least because for Catholicism the possibility of salvation is extended to all people, and love for the enemy is demanded. The word "revolution" appears several times in the work,[50] suggesting more or less reliance on violence, but always as the last resource—which happens to be a condition of a "just war".[51]

Liberation theology, however, raises several questions. Here I discuss two main challenges. First is its widely discussed relationship with Marxism. Alistair Kee sums up this relation when he claims that, in Gutiérrez's work, "[n]othing is taken directly from Marx, but the perception of the whole complex now owes a great deal to his philosophy".[52]

The central criticism Kee offers to Gutiérrez's work is the latter's failure to deal with Marx's attack on religion as a reversal of reality. The influence of Feuerbach on Marx here is fundamental. According to the former, religion is the outcome of a movement whereby someone "projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object of this projected image of himself, thus converted into a subject".[53] Religion helps human beings to explain that which is mysterious in themselves. For Marx, however, religion is not the source of mystery, but of error:

> Man, who looked for a superhuman being in the fantastic reality of heaven and found nothing there but the *reflection* of himself, will no longer be dis-

[49] Gutiérrez, G., *A Theology of Liberation…*, p. 17.
[50] Gutiérrez even speaks of a "permanent cultural revolution" (p. 21), which, in my opinion, may be understood as a clever mixture of Trotsky's "permanent revolution" and Mao's "cultural revolution."
[51] Gutiérrez, G., *A Theology of Liberation…*, p. 64; cf. Boff, L.; Boff C., *Introducing Liberation Theology*, p. 40.
[52] He provides several examples of this debt: *(1)* it is because of Marx that Gutiérrez senses the inadequacy of development and consequently prefers the term liberation; *(2)* the concept of praxis is indebted to Marx's view of the relationship between theory and action; *(3)* the relationship between salvation and liberation is formulated in the parallel of sin/salvation, alienation/liberation; *(4)* the idea that following the example of the civilized countries would liberate poor countries from poverty and suffering is just an ideological maneuver for oppression, etc. Kee, A., *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology*, Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990, pp. 164-167.
[53] Feuerbach, L., *The Essence of Christianity*, New York: Harper & Row, 1957, pp. 29-30.

> posed to find but the *semblance* to himself, only an inhuman being, where he seeks and must seek his true reality.[54]

Religion creates a world, to be sure, but an *inverted*, false one. Under Marx's lens Feuerbach appears, then, still too theological. This explains why the criticism of religion is at the basis of all criticisms: because only through the critique of religion is it possible to discover a methodology to criticize other forms of false consciousness. According to Kee:

> So far as Marx's reversal theory is concerned, the criticism of religion is *integral to the development of his whole philosophy*: it cannot simply be extracted and dealt with as a discrete social institution. As the premise of all criticism, it is essential for understanding all subsequent disclosures of reversal.[55]

The problem here is that it is not possible to instrumentalize Marxism to the point where one could retain the carcass of the theory, i.e., its socio-historical methodology, and transpose it to the Christian-liberationist project, the metaphysics of which are located at the antipodes of the former's project. The fallacy, finally, consists in thinking that we can import a methodology without taking care of its metaphysical basis.[56] It does not matter, then, how much we deny—as Gutiérrez is at pains to do—that our project is an immanentization of Christianity when the tools we have chosen to work with create a paradox between what we want and what we can do.

A second challenge emerges when we compare Gutiérrez's claim that liberation theology seeks to create consciousness in people and liberate them with the historical fact that the major figures of this movement have been bishops and priests. We could see this, again, with Marxists eyes: bishops and priests are to the Latin American poor what Marx was to the proletarian class. Just as for Marx "in times when the class struggle nears the decisive hour… a small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary class",[57] liberation theologians can be seen as the minority that, conscious of the history of alliances of the church with those responsible for "institutionalized violence", joins the poor, for only them, as Marx's proletarians, hold the future. But even if this is the case, an important challenge emerges: How can liberation theology avoid the danger of building a new Christendom? Gutiérrez acknowledges the danger of a "Constantinianism of the Left". His answer, however, is far from convincing: "[W]e believe that the best way to achieve this development of power is precisely by resolutely casting our lot

[54] Quoted in Kee, A., *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology*, p. 45.
[55] Kee, A., *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology*, p. 61, emphasis mine.
[56] Cf. *Libertatis Nuntius,* VII.6, 9.
[57] Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

with the oppressed and the exploited in the struggle for a more just society".[58] Here, Gutiérrez is at best avoiding the question, namely: Should the "permanent cultural revolution" be—as it seems to be the case—the primary work of priests and bishops? Are they to seek an active engagement in politics? And if that is the case, how to avoid a religious government once they are successful? Is it not rather the case that, whenever the clergy transforms itself into a political vanguard, Ivan Karamazov's story of the Grand Inquisitor becomes a terrifying possibility, and the work of liberation is turned on its head, becoming a new servility? Dostoyevsky's Inquisitor opposes Christ's return to earth:

> For fifteen centuries we have struggled with that freedom, but now it is all over, and over for good. You don't believe that it is over for good? You look at me meekly and do not even consider me worthy of indignation? Well, I think you ought to be aware that now, and particularly in the days we are currently living through, those people are even more certain than ever that they are completely free, and indeed they themselves have brought us their freedom and have laid it humbly at our feet…
> At last they themselves will understand that freedom and earthly bread in sufficiency for all are unthinkable together, for never, never will they be able to share between themselves! They will also be persuaded that they will never be able to be free, because they are feeble, depraved, insignificant and mutinous.[59]

Liberation theology fails to shield itself against a relapse into Christendom. To continue with our analogies, just as Marx didn't discuss what the future would look like after the triumph of the revolution, liberation theology has no words about the role of a highly politicized clergy in a post-revolutionary Latin America.[60] The best protection against Christendom is found in the distinction between the secular and the religious, which implies that the church's hierarchy—while certainly not apolitical—should be focused on eternal life.[61] This does not preclude the necessary and just demand of libera-

[58] Gutiérrez, G., *A Theology of Liberation…*, p. 151.
[59] Dostoyevsky, F., *The Brothers Karamazov,* New York: Penguin Books, 2003, pp. 328, 330.
[60] The church's answer to this question is straightforward: "[T]he Church's Magisterium does not wish to exercise political power or eliminate the freedom of opinion of Catholics regarding contingent questions. Instead, it intends—as is its proper function—to instruct and illuminate the consciences of the faithful, particularly those involved in political life, so that their actions may always serve the integral promotion of the human person and the common good. The social doctrine of the Church is not an intrusion into the government of individual countries. It is a question of the lay Catholic's duty to be morally coherent, found within one's conscience, which is one and indivisible". *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church,* §571. Available at https://bit.ly/3u3uwNe.
[61] Henri De Lubac is radical in this matter: "The more a priest is conscious of his high spiritual mission and is really faithful to it, the more he has the right—because he has the corre-

tion theology to the church to become a church of the poor. In fact, it seems to me that the excessive politicization of the church, a yearning for power, has led to the many scandals and corruptions the church faces today.

This unnecessary politicization of the clergy—which encroaches upon a sphere that belongs to the laity—derives from two conceptual problems in liberation theology. Liberation theology was born in a time of crisis: priest, nuns and others were killed, thrown out of planes into the sea, persecuted, and threatened. In those situations, filled with chaos and disregard for basic human rights, the action of many committed to liberation was not only right, but even heroic. A just war had to be waged, and for this reason many liberationists were martyred. However, these moments of crisis are neither permanent nor all-embracing. Failing to distinguish a moment of crisis, which may justify active political action, even to the point of using physical force, from a post-crisis scenario, eliminates all hope for a normalization of social life. It does not seem that this distinction is made, for example, by Gutiérrez. In the second place, Gutiérrez's understanding of the notion of the "poor" seems only partially in accord with Catholic doctrine. On the one hand, Gutiérrez rightly criticizes those who use the gospel to create a coarse, romanticized notion of poverty.[62] Clearly, poor people are not loved by God *because* there's something intrinsically lovable in their poverty. But, on the other hand, Christ does much more than just announcing material liberation. Underlying Jesus' teaching we find a strong realism: "you always have the poor with you" (Matthew 26:11), a realism that is in line with the tradition of Western political thought, from Plato to Nietzsche: the confrontation between rich and poor is a *constant* in history. This is not, of course, a reason for defeatism, but an observation founded upon human nature. As Reinhold Niebuhr claims: "The hope that there will ever be an ideal society, in which everyone can take without restraint from the common social process 'according to his need,' completely disregards the limitations of human nature".[63] It seems to me that Gutiérrez fails to grasp the complexity of the Catholic doctrine on poverty.

The dangers implicit in liberation theology's excessive anxiety over liberation here and now is more than evident in the more recent generation of liberationists. While Gutiérrez and other first-generation liberation theologians tried to align their teaching with that of the church, a new generation of liberationists has emerged, the doctrinal position of whom is at variance with the church's central dogmas. In an article discussing liberation theology

sponding duty—of detaching himself from purely political problems and human concerns", although some lines below he affirms this means "neither denial nor desertion to the human cause". Lubac, H., *Paradoxes of Faith*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987, p. 95.

[62] Gutiérrez, G., *A Theology of Liberation…*, p. 164.

[63] Niebuhr, R., *Major Works on Religion and Politics,* New York: The Library of America, 2015, p. 291.

as a political theology, Miguel A. De La Torre claims that "[t]he miracle of the incarnation is not that God became human, but rather that God became poor",[64] an idea that contradicts the centrality of the Incarnation for the Christian faith. To be sure, Jesus' poverty is integral to the salvation message; however, the real miracle, the authentic scandal, is that God assumed the human condition—for, evidently, the distance between the richest and the poorest of human beings is insignificant when compared to the distance between God and his creature.

A little further, De La Torre affirms that "Jesus taught that God's reign is for the here and now, not only some future hereafter",[65] an idea that utterly disregards Jesus' answer to Pilate: "My kingship is *not* of this world" (John 18:36). What would be, otherwise, the meaning of Jesus' soothing words to the criminal hanged besides him: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise"? If the kingdom is *fully* here and now, and not otherworldly as well, then Jesus' words to the penitent thief are not soothing, but cruel, no more than a reminder of the fact that, nailed to a cross and about to die, he just missed true life and authentic liberation. Consequently, for De La Torre Jesus' "death was a political act".[66] But this interpretation is foreign to the gospels. Elsewhere, finally, De La Torre takes praxis to the extreme, identifying economic freedom as the enemy of religion: "For the real struggle is not between Christianity and Islam, or Hinduism and Buddhism. Rather, the struggle occurs between the world's disenfranchised and the materialistic religiosity of the world's elite".[67] This affirmation is oblivious to the fact that, for liberation theology, poverty and oppression are manifestations of a more general problem, namely, *sin*, which cannot be identified with it.[68]

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[64] Hovey, C., and Phillips, E., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology,* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 32.

[65] Hovey, C., and Phillips, E., *The Cambridge Companion…* Contrast this idea with Gutiérrez's: "Although the Kingdom must not be confused with the establishment of a just society, this does not mean that it is indifferent to this society… The Kingdom is realized in a society of fellowship and justice; and, in turn, this realization opens up the promise and hope of complete communion of all persons with God. The political is grafted into the eternal" (Gutiérrez, G., *A Theology of Liberation…*, p.135).

[66] Hovey, C., and Phillips, E., *The Cambridge Companion…*, p. 32. Cf. *Libertatis Nuntius:* "An exclusively political interpretation is thus given to the death of Christ. In this way, its value for salvation and the whole economy of redemption is denied" (X.12).

[67] De la Torre, M., *The Hope of Liberation in World Religions,* Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008, p. 6. *Libertatis Nuntius* rightly points out that "[t]o some it even seems that the necessary struggle for human justice and freedom in the economic and political sense constitutes the whole essence of salvation. For them, the Gospel is reduced to a purely earthly gospel" (VI.4) See also *Libertatis Conscientia* (available at: https://bit.ly/2XAWqni) §21.

[68] See *Libertatis Nuntius* IV.14-15.

## 4. Theopolitical imagination and the eschatological horizon

When, in 1935, the German theologian, Erik Peterson, wrote his authoritative essay, *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem*, he was charging against the Nazi threat, warning his then friend, the jurist Carl Schmitt, about the dangers of waging for a messianic political project that displayed a hubris such that it threatened the very foundations of Western civilization. His work is not just an erudite treatise on early Christian theopolitical imagination, but a coded message, veiled as a comparison between Augustine, Eusebius, and Constantine, on the one hand, and Schmitt, Hitler, and himself, on the other, in order to explain to his friend the dangers of an undue divinization of the political realm.

Many Christian thinkers saw the emergence of the Roman Empire as a providential instrument for the Christianization of the world. These early Christians saw the Roman Empire as belonging to God's plan, in the sense that the pacification it brought was a necessary condition for the quick and efficient dissemination of the gospel. Origen read Psalm 72:7 ("In his days justice and fullness of peace have arisen") as a prophecy referring to Rome. Eusebius linked together the end of Jewish kingship and Augustus's rule as the Providential preparation for the birth of the Messiah. What began with Augustus, moreover, was to be finished by Constantine, with whom the Christian era begun. In *The Proof of the Gospel*, Eusebius refuted Celsus' attack on Christianity as a rebellious and antisocial cult and created a Christian political theology. By welding the Roman Empire with the redemptory work of Jesus, Eusebius linked God's monarchy with earthly political authority. The Roman Empire was God's plan, and thus its authority was willed by the King of Kings (*basileus basileōn*).

Peterson's "closure" of political theology runs along two argumentative lines. First, political theology, understood as the attempt to build the earthly city as an image of the heavenly order, is cancelled on the theological side. In his *Third Theological Oration*, Gregory of Nazianzus argued that the unity of the triune God "doesn't find correspondence in the created order".[69] The impossibility for a correspondence between the earthly and the heavenly orders is explained by the unbridgeable distance between the Trinitarian mystery and our reality. Augustine, on his part, will dismiss Eusebius' attempt to see in the Roman Empire an eschatological marker, rejecting that the *Pax Romana* was the perpetual peace announced by the Psalms.

Secondly, we must pay attention to the idea of the "Kingdom", which is a very complex concept in Christian thought. The difficulty to apprehend this idea

[69] Peterson, E., *Theological Tractates*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011, p. 103.

is given by its paradoxical character: the Incarnation implies that the Kingdom is *here* (Mt 1:23, cf. Is 7:14; Mt 12:28, Luke 17:20) but, at the same time, *not yet* (Mk 1:15, Mt 6:10).[70] The time of the church, Peterson argues in *Die Kirche*, runs from Pentecost to Christ's return which, according to Paul, will come only when the Gentiles and, after them, the Jews, convert (Rom 11:25). The pilgrim church is *not*, to be sure, the Kingdom since, as Augustine explains, there are in it many who belong to the earthly city[71] and thus it must wait for Christ to come and divide the tares from the wheat (Mt 13:30). Seen from a soteriological perspective, that the Kingdom is here but not yet builds a bridge between earthly life and salvation: a Christian cannot despise earthly realities to devote herself fully to "heavenly matters", for that would imply that salvation is achieved by means other than a life of service and love to others and God (Jn 13:14, 34). Earthly life is far from disconnected to salvation: it is the very soil where the drama of the confrontation between the earthly and the heavenly cities unfold, the final resolution of which must nevertheless wait until Christ's triumphal return (Mt 24:29-51).

Peterson's work helps us understand the ever-present temptation to bring God's kingdom to earth, here and now, so as to *definitely* solve the many sufferings and ailments humanity face. The yearning for a materialized utopia is condemned to failure, at best, or to the actualization of a hellish reality, at worst. That a perfect world is unachievable in this life is explained by the very unnaturalness of the human being or, in metaphysical words, by her being free. Imagining an *achieved* perfection, thus, ignores the radical unpredictability of the human being and, more often than not, utopia is transformed into the conscious effort to suppress every difference, every resistance, every unconformity with the imagined model. This explains, from the theological side, Ratzinger's assertion that "eschatology expresses the impossibility of perfecting the world within history"[72] and, from the political one, Claude Lefort's warning about "the fantasy of the People-as-One, the beginnings of a quest for a substantial identity, for a social body which is welded to its head, for an embodying power, for a state free from division".[73]

Despite its danger, utopian imagination is necessary in every human society, for it sets the ideal against which human endeavors must be assessed, in order not to fall in a comfortable mediocrity or, worse, to end up justifying evils and injustices for lack of clear standards. Utopia is, therefore, *not* an end to which human beings run, but the way the human mind approximates the just, good, and beautiful life so as to throw light on the way life *actually is.*

[70] O'Collins, G., *Christology. A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 54-55.
[71] Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* I:35.
[72] Ratzinger, J., *Joseph Ratzinger in Communio, Vol. I.*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2010, p. 19.
[73] Lefort, C., *Democracy and Political Theory,* Cambridge, Polity, 1988, p. 20.

The Second Vatican Council was, to be sure, a momentous event for Catholicism and, in no minor way, for Western modernity as a whole. The optimism of the sixties electrified the church, promising that the long reconciliation between the church and modernity was finally at hand, and that by closing the old caesura a new era for the West was to be born. This joyful confidence, however, proved to be premature, if not plainly naïve. Many Catholics felt the church to be capitulating to the forces of liberalism. The council was certainly a space for reconciliation with the secular world as well as with other Christians and religions. There is no doubt, for instance, that some of Luther's critiques to the church in the sixteenth century found an ear at the council, as the decree on the liturgy and the rejection of the papacy as a monarchic power show; also, the decree *Nostra aetate* definitely rejected the doctrine that blamed the Jews[74] with deicide and opened a way for a rich ecumenic dialogue with separated Christians while maintaining the Catholic exceptionalism, that is, rejecting religious pluralism. The radical conservatives who opposed the council nostalgically yearned for the church's "good old days", when popes were monarchs actively participating in politics. However, as we have seen, the pope is not a monarch but the first among the pastors of the church, that is, the one serving all (Mt 20:28; Mk 9:35). Rather than a political power, the church is a spiritual community distinguished by its being a foreigner, or a pilgrim, in this world; any attempt to win the world, therefore, to make it the end of life rather than the arena wherein the soteriological drama is played, leads to a caricature of the Christian faith (Lk 9:25).

On the opposite camp there were many who yearned for a much expedite and radical implementation of the "spirit" of the council,[75] some of whom progressively departed from what the council actually said, creating a "spirit" fitting their own interests and worries. Some of them, justly worried for the inequities and injustices lived by millions here and now, partnered with ideologies alien to Christianity, then failing to reconstruct the proper balances, tensions, and paradoxes inherent to it. For those who fall prey to worldly immediatism, the temptation of considering the church as something malleable,[76] as clay in human hands ready for pursuing their goals, becomes a real danger.[77]

[74] See Nirenberg, D., *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition,* New York: W.W. Norton, 2013.

[75] See Messori, V.; Ratzinger, J., *The Ratzinger Report*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985, pp. 34-35.

[76] "His Church has been replaced by our Church and, thus, by many churches, since everyone has his own. The churches have become our undertakings, of which we are either proud or ashamed". Ratzinger, J., *Fundamental Speeches from Five Decades*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012, p. 144.

[77] Ratzinger reacts against this feverish demand for "reform" in the church, a yearning that is often driven by a falsification of what it is. He insists that, notwithstanding the many scandals inside the church, the multiple ways in which it has betrayed the message of Christ, falling short from its mission, the Church of Jesus "lives behind 'our church.'" Ratzinger, J., *Fundamental Speeches*, p. 146.

An intimate connection is then found between this two, apparently opposed, sides. They both work with a deformed idea of the church. More specifically, both are anxious for a *political* resolution of the human drama, for an immanentization of eschatology that will solve, once and for all, human misery, thus transforming the church into a political instrument.

## 5. Theopolitical imagination in a time of crisis

That we live in a time of general crisis should be evident to anyone with an elemental knowledge of current worldly affairs. Politically, democracies in the world have consistently declined for the past fifteen years;[78] economically, inequality has steadily grown since the 1970s under the reigning neoliberal credo;[79] societies increasingly divide themselves in warring camps—conservatives against liberals, nationalists and xenophobic against open-borders promoters and cosmopolitans, and so on—to the point that no communication seems possible between them. This situation is aggravated by a social media governed by an economic mentality that treats products and ideas as commodities for sale, thus creating the fantasy of unanimity by saturating individuals with information that confirms their own biases and prejudices, fostering a blind radicalism and fanaticism that impedes any kind of democratic dialogue.[80] Religious experience is in no better place: institutional religions are receding—partly due to the victory of the postmodern narcissistic order, but also the effect of the many scandals reported about them, not least the pederasty crisis in the Catholic church—giving way to a diversity of pseudo-religious experiences, some of which see faith as a quasi-magical device designed to produce *individual* wealth and health,[81] while others completely disregarding respect for the dignity of the person and her rights, as the cult to *Santa Muerte*[82] and other sects that engage in criminal acts, as Keith Raniere's NXIVM.

A world where ideas are seldom taken seriously; where the public arena for democratic discussion has been abandoned; where education is obsessively fixated with the mass production of docile workers; where religion has

[78] See Freedom House: *Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy under siege,* https://bit.ly/3jJzniV.
[79] See Piketty, Th., *Capital in the Twenty-First Century,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014, ch.8; Brown, W., *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism. The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2019; Kotsko, A., *Neoliberalism's Demons. On the Political Theology of Late Capital,* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018.
[80] See, for example, the Netflix documentary *Social Dilemma*, minute 55' ff.
[81] See Bowler, K., *Blessed. A History of the American Prosperity Gospel,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
[82] See Chesnut, A., *Devoted to Death. Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

been either forced to become an empty rite, a series of movements, words, and incantations lacking any depth or contact with reality, or has rather emerged as the hubristic attempt to solve the problems of humanity once and for all; where societies have no shared understandings or, when they do have them, they fiercely reject anyone who dares approaching the community with values that challenge the status quo and the hierarchy of inequalities; a society like this resembles the Hobbesian state of nature, where "the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short",[83] rather than a community in the proper sense.

The aftermath of Vatican II, discussed in the first two sections of this article, throws light on our current crisis. It seems that our present crisis is in more than one sense analogous to that of the postconciliar church. The theopolitical experiments of the second half of the twentieth century resulted either from an excess of optimism, which, once the intoxication ceased, left many believers with a taste of incompleteness or even hypocrisy; or from the utter rejection of this optimism from the start, opposing to it the nostalgia for hegemonic times. Today we are also faced with the disappointments of an excess of optimism, namely, the promise that the triumph of democracy would mark a new era. Liberal democracy has proven to be utterly incapable of keeping this promise. On the contrary, populist movements today draw from a dangerous nostalgia for a people without divisions,[84] while the technocrats assert that the problem was *not* the alienation of the people from the State but rather that the professionalization of the State, according to the neoliberal model, has not yet been completed. Both the postconciliar church and the recent populist experiments seem eager and impatient for political change, to the point that in both cases we see the rejection of fundamental tenets, religious or democratic, in the name of a *true*, or *authentic* liberation, freedom, or political life. The parallelism is also obvious when we take a look to the overenthusiastic promises, most of which are just unrealistic and notwithstanding incredibly useful to awaken political radicalism.

Moreover, that contemporary populism is theopolitical is no secret: from former president Donald Trump in the United States, to Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, to name only the more prominent in the continent, the political use of Christian faith—that is, its reformulation into a *civil religion*—has been an important part of the propaganda machineries of these presidents. These politicians have taken Rousseau by heart: religion is used whenever the ideas that the leader wants

[83] Hobbes, Th., *Leviathan*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994, ch. XIII, p. 76.
[84] See Aranda, J., "Populism, acclamation, and democracy", *Constellations*, *28*(4), 2002, pp. 1481-495. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12581

to convey are too abstruse for the people, and thus recourse to the divinity aids the former to assure compliance and docility. Operating from a dishonest basis that Nadia Urbinati describes as "a phenomenology that involves replacing the whole with one of its parts",[85] populism promises peace and reconciliation while feeding on agonistic politics, often using God and religion as criteria for discriminating between the good, honest, or authentic people and those who lie, exploit, and betray the (real) people.

Christianity, however, powerfully opposed the political use of religion, opposed civil religions and denouncing them as human constructions designed to oppress human beings. The separation between church and state was stated by Jesus himself (Mt 22:21). Not without irony, that very church consolidated itself by means of a theopolitical experiment, namely, Christendom, which Ratzinger harshly criticized by asserting that "[t]he use of the State by the Church for its own purposes, climaxing in the Middle Ages and in absolutist Spain of the early modern era, has since Constantine been one of the most serious liabilities of the Church, and any historically minded person is inescapably aware of this".[86]

In order to live in peaceful, harmonic societies, a very difficult balance between freedom and equality, the person and her community, shared values and the principle of authenticity, must be attempted. Without it, human beings quickly fall into the temptation for quick, definite solutions, forgetting that, while human beings remain what they are, that is, free persons endowed with a powerful but nonetheless limited rationality, and an ontological need for the other, the world will always be a place where good and evil, wisdom and ignorance, charity and envy, coexist side by side. When radicalism takes the stage, the possibility for any serious encounter with the other becomes null at just the same time as tyranny smiles wickedly.

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[85] Urbinati, N., *Me the People. How Populism transforms Democracy,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019, p. 13.
[86] Ratzinger, J., *Theological Highlights of Vatican II,* New York: Paulist Press, 1966, p. 144.

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