

The following presentation was delivered by John O'Malley, S.J. He spoke at St. Simon and Jude Church in Westland Michigan on May 21. His talk appears in its entirety at: [http://www.elephantsinthelivingroom.com/John OMalley talk.doc](http://www.elephantsinthelivingroom.com/John_OMalley_talk.doc), and was transcribed by Bev Parker.

... I happened to be in Rome from 1963 to 1965 when I was writing my dissertation on the Council. It was an extremely exciting time to be in Rome, as you've heard many times over, and as a Catholic priest who was a Catholic; and so I was of course interested in the Council, which was taking place less than a mile away from where I was living. So that was one aspect of it. But the other aspect was I was working on a 16th Century church reformer prior to the Council of Trent; so I sort of had a rather professional interest in the Council – what's the relationship between this older sort of Church reform and what's going on today – so that got me really very much involved in the Council in a professional sort of way.

So, of course, I was able to attend a few of the public sessions that were open to the public, but also I, as many others tried to do, was able to, every once in a while on an afternoon, sneak in to some of the press briefings. And that was in many ways better than being at the Council itself, because you got questions and answers from the press to several of the bishops who were present with a few of the council experts and so forth. So that got me involved in that way. But I never thought that I would write anything about the Council or get involved as a historian. But life takes strange turns, and I wrote my first article on the Council in 1971. And I say, ever since then, I feel like a combination of Pontius Pilate and Lady Macbeth (laughter) trying to wash my hands of it. But I can't do it; so maybe this book is the culmination of it.

... So I have three phases of interpretation of the Council. The first phase would begin when the Council ended in 1965 and would go on for about twenty years to roughly 1985. These were commentaries by participants in the Council or journalistic accounts of the Council by journalists and others who were there. That's the first phase – not doing much more than taking the text line by line to see what they meant.

Then the next phase took place principally in Europe in Louvain le Neuve, in Russia and Italy, and in Bologna in Italy, also in France and Germany, but especially in those two places. And that was characterized by a lot of archival work and a lot of work on the background that was not available until after about twenty years. Meanwhile, the Vatican had published fifty-three volumes, in Latin of course, each of which ranged from about 700 to 900 pages of the official documents of the Council, that is to say, the preparatory documents, the drafts of the documents, all the speeches in St. Peter's, the official sort of internal correspondence between Paul VI and the Council, and so on and so forth. So that was now available. So that phase, I think, is now pretty much over. So that work has been pretty much done.

It's brought us to this third phase. And the culmination of that phase was a five volume history of the Council, published in seven languages almost simultaneously, also in English called, *History of Vatican II*, edited by an Italian, Giuseppe Alberigo, who died a few years ago. That brings us to a whole new stage. Interestingly, that history has been semi-officially criticized in high Roman circles, has been criticized in high Roman circles, for occurring in the Council as a kind of a rupture of the past; whereas, actually, all the Council was, was a continuity with the Catholic tradition; and in my words, if that's

ultimately true, you press it as far as it can go – that means nothing happened, right? No change. It's all continuity.

So right now there is this controversy going on, and Cardinal Ratzinger was part of the instigator of it, because in 1985 he gave a very famous report in which he said, "Oh, the Council, I mean, there is no before and after in the history of the Catholic Church." Oh! That was news to me as an historian. (Laughter) If that's true, I lose my job. It means nothing happened. The year he was elected as Pope Benedict XVI in December 2005, the year he was elected, he gave an important conference to the Roman Curia, to the cardinals, in which he brought up this whole question of the hermeneutics, that is to say, the framework of interpretation of the Council. Previously, he was saying a hermeneutic of rupture on the one hand and a hermeneutic of continuity on the other.

Well, the only people I know, who espouse an interpretation of rupture, are the Lefebvre crowd, who see the Council as a heresy and as a complete break with the Catholic tradition. We all, of course, believe in the continuity of the Catholic tradition. But did anything happen? But in this address to the cardinals, he changed his tune a little bit and spoke of a hermeneutic of rupture and a hermeneutic of reform. And reform implies both change and continuity. And I think that's where everybody is except for these radical people on the far, far, far, far right, who deny that anything good happened at the Council and it was a rupture with the tradition.

So at any rate, my book appears in that whole, you might say, tradition. ... First of all, I tell the basic story from really 1959, when the Council was called up, until 1965. So that's something to refresh people's memory and to lead you into the real drama of the Council, the debates in the Council.

So one of the great shocks, when the Council first opened, was for Catholics to find out that there were all these disagreements; and soon there emerged two parties, you might say, which I call the majority and the minority – sometimes called the liberals and the conservatives; sometimes called the progressive and the conservatives. Those terms are okay, but they have ideological baggage; so I prefer majority and minority. Interesting about the majority, it's a real overwhelming cascade majority. It's roughly 85 to 90 percent of all crucial votes, and the minority 10, 12, 15 percent; so it's a very lopsided contest in terms of sheer quantity and where people are. So that's one of the first things it does, because as I say, it refreshes all of our memories and tells a story that many people have never heard before.

...How does this Council fit with the other councils? So a short passage there, for instance, the first eight councils were called by laymen or a laywoman, the Empress Irene, for one of them held in the East. The language was Greek, very little papal participation, by and large; and then the rest in the West, and so forth; so that big difference, and then the different medieval councils, until we get to Trent, and so forth – so trying to show in that sense how Vatican II is alike and different from other councils. For instance, the wonderful Council of Trent, how many bishops opened the Council of Trent? How about a guess? 500? 200? You're going in the right direction. Believe it or not, 200 bishops at maximum, and practically all of them were from Italy, Spain or Portugal. So it's quite different from Vatican II. So that context. And then the relationship of the popes to the councils; but then, especially, what I call the long nineteenth century.

So what we don't realize, by and large, is the traumatic shock the French Revolution was to Catholic officialdom, and the values of liberty, equality and fraternity of the French Revolution. What a shock that was to affected bishops, but especially to the papacy, which was also under siege because of the drive to unify the country and to annex the Papal States. So the long nineteenth century – this official opposition to sort of what was happening intellectually, and politically, and even socially. That on the other hand, the grassroots of Catholicism, a lot of appropriation of what was going on, and indeed most important for Vatican II, was this intense interest in historical research in liturgy, in the Fathers of the Church and in the Bible – and finding out, “Oh! It was not always thus,” and “How do we deal with this issue?” – so that context there back in Vatican II and then more particularly the pontificate of Pius XII, the Second World War, the end of colonialism, the threat of the bomb, the two sides in the Cold War, all sorts of things going on there; the surgence, I should say, of Christian democracy, as Catholics now taking the lead in the political life in Italy, Germany and France, where they had been marginalized for at least 150 years and the leaders of the Christian Democratic movement were all Catholics: DeGasperi in Italy, Adenauer in Germany, de Gaulle and Schuman in France. And liberty, equality and fraternity, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and freedom of speech were kind of taken for granted; so it was all part of the background for Vatican II – part of the context.

Another thing that the book does is look at the procedures in the Council and see how important they were – as we all know from meetings: if you get control of the procedures, you've got control of the outcome, right? So one of the problems with Vatican II was they had very sloppy procedures, very generic procedures. It was not sure who was doing what, and who was responsible for what; and in particular, what was never clearly stated was precisely how the Pope related to the assembly down in St. Peter's – the popes were never in any working session of the Council; they were in their apartments; the assembly was down here. How do they communicate? With whom did they communicate? In what guise did they communicate? Paul VI played five or six roles in that regard. One role he wanted to play was he was a council father like any other; and then sometimes he was a promoter of the council's unity; and sometimes he was a sort of break on what was going on. So this is extremely important. And if you sort of don't understand that aspect of the Council, you are never going to understand the dynamism and what happened at the end.

Also the book points out all these unofficial groups that were there that were working, for instance, the bishop's conferences, how important they were in this massive body, getting consensus and communicating information, and how people were feeling on different things. One special group needs to be mentioned, and that is the group of international fathers, which was the core of the minority opinion, and Archbishop Lefevre was a member of that group. So they were there really trying to – they were not all happy with the direction the Council was taking, and they got into a lot of trouble – but they were extremely effective there. Again, in terms of procedure, one of the things my book lifts up and makes clear is the four items that Paul VI removed from the agenda, and they were crucial items as you will realize as soon as I tick them off.

- So one was celibacy. This was about to come up on the floor of the Council in the third period, and he sent down word that it was not to be discussed, that he was going to insist upon the traditional discipline. That announcement was greeted with great applause, because even the few bishops, the very few bishops, who really wanted to raise the question and kind of push it, did not want to do it in this big public discussion,

which would have set off a media frenzy. But any rate, they thought maybe something would happen on that issue after the Council. But at any rate that's one issue.

- The other was, of course, birth control. The book has a lot about that issue and Archbishop Dearden at that time was head of the sub-commission on marriage; and he was the one who took the brunt of all the conflict between the commission and Paul VI on this issue at the very end of the Council. So read my book, it's an interesting story.
- Then the reform of the Roman Curia. Once the Council got underway this issue came up, because the bishops felt that now they were talking to one another, they had a lot of bad stories to tell about how the Curia, the different congregations, were kind of stepping on their toes. And then in the Council itself, they felt that the members of the Curia were using their kind of pressure, their position to push forward their agenda, which was not the agenda of the Council – so the reform of the Roman Curia – this has been an issue in the Church ever since, at least since the 13th Century. It's a hard nut to crack! But finally, Paul VI, simply at the very beginning of his Pontificate, removed that from the agenda.
- And then he also removed from the agenda an instrument for the functioning of episcopal collegiality. At the beginning of the fourth session, in an Apostolic Letter, he announced the creation of the Synod of Bishops. And this gets incorporated into the Council's documents. as if it's sort of an instrument, an expression of collegiality; but it really is not. If you read that document, you will see how it's an instrument of papal primacy, because the Pope calls the synod, he sets the agenda, he in effect determines who is going to be there, and so on and so forth. So it's strictly consultative; so it's not what collegiality was looking for in any case; and so all this on procedure.

...

Of course, there were hot issues. And again, these are a good indication. If you study those as to what was really going on in the Council, what was happening there, how to put your finger on the essence of the Council, if you will:

- Religious liberty, which to Americans is: "What's the problem?" Well, it was a big problem. It was a document that almost didn't make it through the Council. As a matter of fact, the night of the – well not the night, just a day or so before the crucial vote on it – the commission in charge of it debated whether or not simply to withdraw it from the Council, because they were afraid that although it would get a majority vote: it would not get a sufficient majority for the Pope to promulgate it. So that's how close it was – religious liberty.
- The creed on the Jews, which I mentioned before, had all kinds of political ramifications.
- So this whole non-Christian religions: why are we talking about them in the first place?
- The episcopal collegiality – so the document on the Church, what are you saying? – that bishops as a college, as a group has a responsibility for the Universal Church, for the whole Church. Well, isn't that what the pope does? And isn't that what

was defined in Vatican I with the definition of papal primacy? How do these fit together; and can they fit together? And where does this idea come from anyway? Is this just kind of a religious ecclesiastical form of Christian democracy? A big issue, right? A big issue, a hot issue at the Council, as we know, we can talk about forever.

- And then, of course, the question of the liturgy, and the revision of the liturgy, and the questions of vernacular, and so forth.
- Ecumenism. So these are sort of the hot points of the Council. So that's the scope.

... So the Council was struggling to emerge from that Eurocentric perspective; and the very first document, the Document on the Liturgy, says, "We welcome the traditions," and so forth, "of all races and all cultures as long as they're not filled with superstition," and so on and so forth. So it tried to move out of that in an attempt to give the local Episcopal Conferences more determination, especially for the new churches another attempt to move out of the Euro-centrism. So this problem of the world church is a very important way to look at the Council and helps us get it into perspective. You can see that popping up in different ways. ...

... At the Council everybody agreed on *development*. Here's the question though: can it stop, or just keep going? Marian doctrines, Immaculate Conception, Assumption: at the time of the council, many people were asking that now there be a definition of Mary as co-redemptrix, Mary as mediatrix of all graces, and so on and so forth. Blocked! Didn't go any further. If development stopped, if so how so and why? Ah, another question.

There is another word hooked on here, a French word theologians coined in the beginning of the 20th century: *ressourcement*, going back to the sources – old, old, old idea in Christianity, old, old idea in all sort of reforms in the Church: go back to the Bible; go back to the early Church. What this really means is we're in a certain place, we're going along a certain path. Hummm! We go back and look. There's a fork in the road there. Let's not go this way; let's go back there and go this way.

Episcopal collegiality: this was rediscovered historically in the 20th century, late 18th, 19th and 20th century; and it was discovered that, gosh, the way the Church governed on the universal level, as well as on the particular level, was collegially – bishops' getting together in provincial councils, or even more general councils, and making the crucial decisions. Ecumenical councils were the great exception, but the way the Church functioned was that way. And so how does – we're going back now to collegiality – papal primacy develop? Can we put these two together? Can we modify this somehow through *ressourcement*, through going back? So you see the issue, the problem of historical consciousness, historical awareness that the Church never had to face before, because we were all very historically conscious. We know that Julius Caesar did not smoke a cigar, right? (laughter) We know that.

Then the next issue is the center periphery issue, the third issue. What had happened was a growth of the power of the center, and the growth of the actions taken by the center, that is to say, by the Holy See, especially after the definition of papal primacy – something I've mentioned several times already. So what the Council tried to do with the doctrine of collegiality was to balance that with this older doctrine, and teaching, and practice of the Church, but not simply meeting with the bishops; but it was a wider

principle, trying to give more authority, as the Council did, to national episcopal conferences, and then telling bishops that they should have diocesan councils containing both their clergy and their laity, and then also parish councils – so this attempt to balance extreme centralization with something else, with something which would be more collegial, more dialogical, and a key word in the Council that begins to appear in this regard is charism – that there is a charism in each one of us, there is a charism in the local Church; there are these gifts of the Spirit that are not confined to the official body. So instead of a strictly top-down, they sort of modify that with something horizontal. Pius X, I mean he was clear: boy! the pope tells the bishops; the bishops tell the priests; the priests tell the people; story finished. I mean, this is explicit. I mean, this is the way it goes. Moreover, he forbade priests to gather for meetings, except on very rare occasions, and only with the bishop's permission and supervision. That's what you call center.

People of God. That's an expression of the Council, and it sort of indicates this whole balancing of things. That brings us now to all these issues under the issues; world church, change, center periphery and now the fourth style are all interrelated.

So we finally come to this issue of the style of the Council – the way the Council talked. The Council talks funny. If you compare with other councils, it talks funny. It talks a completely different language. Nobody's really paid much attention to that, although it's one of the most obvious things about the Council. Is this not significant? I think it is extremely significant. That's one of the main points of my book!

Pope John wanted a pastoral council; therefore the pastoral language. So the first period of the council, 1962, bishop after bishop got up and said, "These documents that you've presented to us (the original documents), they're not pastoral language. We want documents in the language of Scripture and of the Fathers of the Church. We don't want this juridical and legalistic language." So that is where this issue has been focused. I've tried to take it a real step deeper, and I've analyzed the style, that is to say, the literary forms and the vocabulary of previous councils. And here's the kicker: even local councils, but especially the ecumenical councils, were all modeled ultimately on the old Roman Senate. Case in point: the Council of Nicea, 325, the first of the ecumenical councils. Who called it? The Emperor Constantine. Where did it meet? In his palace. Who gave the inaugural talk? Constantine. Who set the agenda? Bishops, but also Constantine: "Deal with this guy Arius! Settle this! It's causing all kinds of problems in the empire!" No, he gave the bishops freedom and so forth; but he kind of treated them as his ecclesiastical senate, and they acted as an ecclesiastical senate.

That council and future councils, two things they did: they were legislative and judicial. Legislative: they passed laws; judicial: they tried and condemned ecclesiastical criminals, sometimes handing them over to the state to be burned. This happened with Jan Hus at the Council of Constance. So laws! So laws are clear cut and often carry a penalty for non-observance. So there's a kind of punitive aspect to it. The specific genre of this form is the canon, a short ordinance. If anyone would say such and such let him be anathema; let him be excommunicated. If someone should do such and such, let him be excommunicated. No anathemas, no cannons in Vatican II.

"Well!" you say, "yeah! but that was old time stuff anyway; that was old time religion by 1960s." Sorry! It was not. The Roman Synod, which met in 1960 for the Diocese of Rome, and was supposed to be a kind of dress rehearsal for the Council, passed 775

canons. So it was not a dead issue. None in Vatican II. Vatican II really adopted a literary form of the Fathers of the Church, kind of a panegyric, holding up ideals for imitation, and with that introduced a whole new vocabulary, a vocabulary absolutely central to the Christian tradition, absolutely going to the heart of the Christian tradition, but a vocabulary brand new to councils. I'll give you some examples of the words: friendship, cooperation, collaboration, partnership, evolution, charism, dialogue, collegiality, conscience, holiness, People of God. So you have the horizontal words. You have reciprocity words. You have friendship words. You have change words. You have service words. You have interiority words: conscience, holiness. Maybe the call to holiness may be a fifth issue under the issue but at any rate why does this call to holiness now emerge for the first time in a council? Because the literary form allows it to emerge; matter of fact, invites it to emerge; and now becomes one of the great light motifs of the Council. So the Council really has a spiritual message to all of us.

I have this kind of litany that I like to recite about this kind of change, this change in vocabulary, that implied and brought with it a change in priorities and values, deep values:

- from commands to invitations
- from monologue to dialogue
- from laws to ideals
- from threats to persuasion
- from coercion to conscience
- from ruling to serving
- from vertical and top down to horizontal
- from passive acceptance to active participation
- from exclusion to inclusion
- from static to changing
- from hostility to friendship
- from prescriptive to principle
- from behavior modification to conversion of heart.

Now the council, of course, was not dismissing those earlier values and those earlier priorities. I mean, it's after all, it's not trying to stamp them out, but to modify them in this way, and to give sort of a whole new sense of balance in the Church. The question is: how does the Church behave? How do you behave? It's a message for all of us: how do you behave? So some modification in priorities and values, the model of the ideal churchman, the ideal Christian; it holds up a model of holiness really, a special model of holiness. And this is a teaching; it is not something defined, but it's a teaching. This is what the Council is presenting to us. It's a teaching of the Council. So Cardinal Ottaviani was absolutely right: you cannot divorce the pastoral from the doctrinal. And here we have a doctrine, we have a teaching for the Church. So another way, quoting myself now, in other words, the Council proposed a model of the Church that was less that of a lawmaker, judge, police officer, and more that of a guide, a partner, friend and inspired helpmate. No previous ecumenical council every attempted so much. So this is what I mean by the Spirit of the Council: it's a teaching.

What happened after the Council? Did anything really happen? Well certainly – this whole issue of religious liberty, or the way we deal with non-Catholics, our whole attitude towards them, the whole sort of shift in model of what it means to be a Catholic. Yes, a number of things happened. But what did not happen? The center held and this has been then the problem. The center held. And the first instance of this was the encyclical

Humanae Vitae. So you have the issues under the issues right there. *Casti Connubii*? Could that be changed? No, it could not be changed – and therefore a decision from the center, which was a decision that kind of overrode a collaborative style. So that's the problem of the Council, that's the problem we're facing today.

Now let me end by something really wild. On Monday I sent an article to America Magazine entitled, "Obama and Vatican Council II." That's all I'm saying. (Laughter) By remembering his speech at Grand Park the night he was elected, and then his speech at Notre Dame: what did he call for? He called for civility; he called for dialogue; he called for the end of name calling; he called for an attempt to work together on common ground. That is exactly what the Council – *Church in the Modern World* – that's exactly what the Council was calling all of us to. So the one part of the message of the Council may not have taken root in the Church; but it certainly has taken root in him unbeknownst; and that's what he's calling us to. So maybe through the back door he will come back into the Church.

Michele Madigan Somerville contributed the following to the June 27 *New York Times*. She is the author of *Wisegal (Ten Pell Books)* and *Black Irish*, forthcoming from Plain View Press. Her verse has appeared in *Mudfish*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Hanging Loose* and other publications.

Born Again in Brooklyn

I.

About a decade ago, moved by a convergence of my longstanding fascination with religion and a time of great personal loss, I embarked on a search for a church and wound up a born-again Catholic. It was not a straight or untroubled path, guided as it was by both my attraction to and enmity for the Roman Catholic Church into which I was born and baptized.

Growing up Irish Catholic in New York City put me in a good position to experience the best and worst of the Church. Most of the Sisters of Charity who taught at my grade school were tyrants. In 1971 I knocked on the door of my parish rectory to inquire about becoming an altar server; I was advised that only boys could serve. Brides, said the priest, were the only females allowed on the altar. When my mother became critically ill at age 30, a Catholic priest administering last rites, refused to offer absolution when she, who had given birth to four children by age 25, refused to express contrition for taking birth control pills. People for whom I care deeply have been molested by priests.

In 1985, while working as a high school English teacher in a parochial school, I watched a 19-year student of mine weep in homeroom in response to that morning's "pro-life" announcement, which included references to "mothers who killed their own babies." I learned later that this young man's mother had terminated a pregnancy two days earlier. My gay brother, at the time of his death at 45, felt despised by the Church he had always loved.

But a radical nun was the first person to teach me anything sophisticated about poetry. The Catholic Church in New York has fed, educated and clothed more poor people than any other agency in the city. On most days a logic-defying confidence in the potential of the sacraments to deliver grace persists in me. The beauty of even ordinary churches has never failed to astonish me. While I consider the brutality of the papacy, now and

throughout history, a source of shame, Roman Catholic art, often commissioned by those very same bad popes is a source of pride, and comprises a tradition in which I, as a poet, often work.

Roman Catholic, as it turned out, was the language my spirit already knew. Burning hyssop and frankincense, the stark and heart-charging splendor of Gregorian chant, Marian devotion; the iconography, the Latin Agnus Dei and Litany of the Saints, the Angelus bells, the rapture at the crux of Catholic worship have always held fierce sway with me.

As I started to experiment with religious observance, I quickly developed a sense of what I did and did not want. My aims were practical and ethereal, metaphysical and physical. I wanted to transcend, but as the mother of three toddlers, I wanted convenience, too. I craved beauty, *musica sacra*, social justice work, and maybe a whisper of ancient tongues in my ear, but I also needed a church that would embrace the realities of motherhood. If the celebrant of the mass glowered or gawked when I jammed the baby up my shirt to nurse at mass, he failed the audition and I never went back.

I liked parishes that were racially and socio-economically diverse, houses of worship that were beautiful, the presence of women priests when I was lucky enough to encounter it. I had zero tolerance for folk masses, anti-abortion diatribes, ecclesiastical greed, rote reciters of scripture and congregants who refused to sing. (After all, as St. Augustine said, “singing is twice praying.”) When people in the pews were unkind to my generally well-mannered children, I crossed their church off my list. I preferred my homilists witty, lyrical and learned. A brilliant theologian and Dante maven who used to celebrate mass a few mornings a week in my neighborhood helped hook and reel me in. Most of all it was another — a lyrical priest I successfully hectored and charmed into serving as my *de facto* guru — who presided over my rebirth as a Catholic. And so I began to regularly attend Roman Catholic mass.

II.

You might wonder how someone like me — a feminist-progressive living in 21st-century Brooklyn — can abide the Vatican’s positions. Well, I don’t. I am Catholic under protest and I’m in good company. The long tradition of radical thinking is alive and well in my Church.

I recently attended an interfaith Gay Pride Celebration in held in a Roman Catholic Church. One of the speakers was a former Catholic nun who left her order many years ago and is currently an Interfaith minister. She spoke of her work as a person of the cloth, her life as a lesbian, her 25 years with her beloved. The honorific “Reverend” precedes her name. She wears a Roman collar. That night, her address was filled with surprises, but only one aspect of her speech shocked me: her fervent recommendation that progressive Catholics remain in the Church — so as to be in a position to create change. She still worships in a Roman Catholic Church.

I love the radical Catholic Church. I love that there are Roman Catholic bishops sticking their necks out to ordain women. That Catholic doctrine places mighty emphasis on the role of conscience in worship and creates fertile ground for conscientious dissent. I support dramatic change as energetically as I can. I withhold my cash from the bishops and hand my diocesan appeal tender to the Woman’s Ordination Conference and to SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests). I devote much time and talent to

working in the Gay Ministry at my church. I recognize it is my obligation as a conscious, conscientious Catholic to discern — to know that the church no more belongs to the Vatican than it does to me. The power of the Church may rest with the College of Cardinals, but its glory rests with people like me.

Once I accepted that being Roman Catholic did not require that I be a papist — once I understood that it was possible to be simultaneously outraged by and in love with the Church — I saw the obstacles to being a practicing Catholic in a new way.

III.

I certainly do not see religion as essential to an ethical, spiritually rich life. I am married to an agnostic Jew and I educate our three children in two faiths, teaching them to pray, modeling what practicing a religion authentically looks like. “Getting religion” has rendered me neither righteous, nor saved. In April, as I read a Times report about [the efforts of Atheist Humanists to organize](#) in South Carolina, I uttered sotto voce, “God bless them,” so inspired was I by the nobility of their cause.

Religion has expanded not only how I relate to “the Divine” — by which I mean the infinite creative force beyond space and time which moves and is moved by love — but also it has expanded the way I think and feel about other faiths. The deeper in I go into my own faith, the greater my appreciation for that of others. The more confidence I gain in my own path, the more certain I am that there are many true paths.

My practice of Catholicism inspired me to step up my efforts to educate my children about Jewish Sabbath observance and Torah, for example. When I light the candles on Friday nights, I do not do so as Jew, but I don’t exactly do so as a Christian either. I do it as the mother of children of the tribe, and when I do so, I enter this ritual fully, as a soul rising to the occasion of something more infinite than the sum of all our ritualistic parts — I stretch — a soul reaching to touch the hem of the garment of the Divine.

It is through practice that I have come to believe that if there is indeed a God presiding over the End of Days, the particulars, the language and myth, various sects employ as means for understanding and revering God will wash away moot in the flood of some unified, unifying light. Practicing provides pockets of peace, soothes me when I am terrified, enhances my appreciation of the created world, helps me to shape who I am into the woman I wish to become. When I’m lucky, practice ushers me toward glints of transcendence.

God is not verifiable, worship can never be wholly rational and men and women can never properly parse the mind of an infinite God. Devotion is built like love; it opens, and it opens up — this, in its own time. For many, religion is a fairy tale. For others, it’s the most real and true thing imaginable. For me, it’s usually both.

From Whispers in the Loggia, June 27. Please support Rocco Palma at Whispers.

... Against this backdrop, another “impending” document has taken center-stage in some circles: a *motu proprio* placing the Pontifical Commission *Ecclesia Dei* — the Vatican liaison to the traditionalist communities (most notably the Society of St Pius X) — under the oversight of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and its prefect, SoCal’s own Cardinal William Levada.

Said to be "imminent" by both the SSPX's Bishop Bernard Fellay (who said he was told to expect it before June 20) and the Holy See itself in its prior declaration that the Swiss fraternity's currently underway priestly ordinations would be considered "illegitimate," the move is seemingly experiencing a hold-up of its own... and in one of his recent "Newsflashes" from Rome, *Inside the Vatican's* Bob Moynihan offers one possible reason why:

According to one friend here, "Behind the pretext of changing *Ecclesia Dei*, and merging it into the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Pope wants to reopen a theological dialogue concerning Vatican II."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The Second Vatican Council provoked an earthquake in the Church," my friend said. "The clergy, the laity, and the Vatican itself — everything was shaken. And now, 45 years later, there is only one group which wants a thorough debate on the meaning of the conciliar documents: the Society of St. Pius X. And the purpose of moving *Ecclesia Dei* under the CDF is to prepare the way for a thorough debate on the conciliar documents."

"So what is the problem with that?" I asked.

"Look," my friend said. "The document regulating the role of *Ecclesia Dei* is all written. It has three parts: 1) some technical points concerning how it will function; 2) some measures about its relationship to the CDF, within the CDF; and 3) an outline of a program for discussing Vatican II and how the Council should be interpreted in keeping with the perennial tradition of the Church."

"And?" I asked.

"That's the problem."

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"Some people don't want these questions opened up again."...

Benedict, knowing that the Second Vatican Council was a watershed in the history of the Church, and knowing also that the interpretation of the Council has led in some unexpected and erroneous directions, has decided to face the basic problem — the problem of the interpretation of Vatican II — by placing the *Ecclesia Dei* commission in the heart of the most important doctrinal office in the Church, in the CDF.

And yet, for some reason, the decision is being delayed.

Disgrace: A New Report Details Religious Abuse at Guantanamo

Writer Michael Peppard is assistant professor of theology at Fordham University. His article appeared in *Commonweal*, June 19, 2009.

Last winter, I wrote for these pages about reports of religious abuse at Guantánamo ([“The Secret Weapon,”](#) December 5, 2008). Among the abuses that had been reported were desecration of the Qur’an, prevention and mockery of prayer, and sexual assaults intended to undermine piety. I argued that the victims of religious abuse considered it worse than anything else they had endured at Guantánamo, though allegations of this kind of abuse have been mainly ignored by the American media.

Some readers responded to the stories of abuse in my article by insisting that terrorists are trained to lie. I couldn’t prove they were wrong. If you had asked me when I wrote the article which of the abuse claims I thought was most likely to have been fabricated by detainees, I would have said it was the stories of forced prostration before a makeshift shrine to a false god. It seemed too outrageous. What could contradict America’s commitment to religious freedom more than coerced apostasy?

But there it was in the recent Senate report on the treatment of detainees in U.S. custody. Listed among the many techniques designed to increase a detainee’s stress level during interrogation was “forcing him to pray to an idol shrine.” Other forms of religious abuse were also acknowledged by the report: the prevention of prayer, grotesque methods of sexual harassment, and the forced shaving of the beard and head, which was intended not only to violate Islamic norms but also to emasculate the detainees, one of whom was even made to wear a burqa.

Until recently, we could only speculate about the origins of such techniques. But the widely held suspicion that many interrogation methods at Guantánamo had been reverse-engineered from the SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape) military training program has now been confirmed. Those who instructed Guantánamo’s interrogators used training slides that recommended “religious disgrace” as a method to “defeat resistance.” Elsewhere the Senate report refers to the religious beliefs and practices of the detainees as “taboos” and “superstitions,” language that suggests an attitude of contempt for Islam.

Acts of religious humiliation remain legal at Guantánamo. In *Rasul v. Rumsfeld*, four British nationals brought a civil suit against ten U.S. government officials. The four claimed they had been illegally detained and mistreated at Guantánamo. Their case was based in part on allegations of religious abuse, which were upheld in the District Court. In January 2008, however, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit decided against them. The Supreme Court later ordered the case to be reviewed by the Court of Appeals, which again ruled against the plaintiffs in April 2009. But the issue of religion at Guantánamo had gained another airing. The Appeals Court’s majority opinion again insisted that the plaintiffs were not among the persons protected by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), which their lawyers had cited in their case. But the Detainee Treatment Act of 2005 also prohibits “cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment,” and who would pretend that religious abuse does not fall into this category? Judge Janice Rogers Brown, in a concurring opinion based on different reasoning, encouraged Congress to revise RFRA for a new era, in which “prolonged military detentions of alleged enemy combatants” are now “part of our consciousness.” If Congress had considered a Guantánamo-like situation when the law was being drafted, she argued, “it likely would have prohibited, subject to appropriate exceptions, unnecessarily degrading acts of religious humiliation.”

One word was surprisingly hard to find in the Senate report: Qur'an. Why? After all, desecration of the Qur'an is by far the most widely alleged form of religious abuse among former detainees. But in the report the Qur'an is mentioned only as a "comfort item" that may be removed from a detainee's cell to weaken his resolve. Apparently, we are to believe that several carefully planned violations of the tenets of Islam were encouraged at Guantánamo, but that desecration of the Qur'an-the ubiquitous symbol of Islam in every cell-was not allowed.

But then, it's hard to tell, since many portions of the report are blacked out, including lines in sections about religious abuse. Maybe references to the desecration of the Qur'an were judged too incendiary for the general public. The government knows that if such desecration were officially acknowledged, this would be the lead story in newspapers all over the Muslim world. The harm that would come from such a disclosure might outweigh the good of transparency.

Consider the case of Muntathar Al-Zaydi, the Iraqi journalist now famous as the "shoe thrower." What was it that stoked his rage? When the London Times asked his family why he turned against the United States, his brother mentioned a May 2008 incident: a Marine in Fallujah had used the Qur'an for target practice. It was an iconic event that tarnished the image of the U.S. military in the region and threatened the security of Baghdad. "He talked incessantly about the subject," said Al-Zaydi's brother.

Nothing threatens America's national security more than the perception that we are at war with Islam. We are not. But to change that false perception we must first change a disgraceful policy.

This two-part series, "When Vatican II Came to the Bronx," is available on line from the *National Catholic Reporter*. The author, Joe Ferullo, lives in Los Angeles and works in the television industry. An excerpt appears below.

<http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/when-vatican-ii-came-bronx>
<http://ncronline.org/news/when-vatican-ii-came-bronx-part-ii>

"In July of 1968, Pope Paul VI issued his famous encyclical banning contraception, *Humanae Vitae*. Paul overruled a committee of bishops studying the issue and seemed to side with more conservative forces.

Humanae Vitae marked a change in my house, with my mother. By the late sixties, Immaculate Conception was a Vatican II wonderland of jam-packed "hootenanny" Masses featuring guitars and tambourines. Foreboding statues of Italian saints were replaced by those brightly-colored banners with free-style felt lettering that called out: He Is Risen! And gospel readings were studied from a hip new book titled, not "The New Testament," but "Good News For Modern Man" -- a perhaps too-contemporary translation into simple English vernacular.

My mother really liked this. She was different in church, more alive than the woman I remembered watching me altar-serve in third grade.

But shortly after July 1968, her attitude toward the church began to shift. Suddenly, it was just "a bunch of old Romans trying to tell everyone what to do." Over the years, my

mother still went to Mass but participated less; she told me recently that she now just went to church to get some quiet time for herself with God, and tuned everything else out. She was once again like the old ladies in black of my childhood.

I was much older when I finally did the calendar math and understood why. In 1967, at age 40, my mother became pregnant. I learned about this when I came home from altar practice one afternoon and found her crying in the kitchen uncontrollably, my dad trying to comfort her without success. She'd had one very rough delivery with my brother thirteen years before, and knew the additional risks of pregnancy at her age.

My sister was born in February of 1968. The delivery was easy, but then my mother began to hemorrhage -- nothing could stop it. I was jolted awake in the middle of the night by a slammed door at my grandmother's house, where my brother and I were staying. It was the sound of my father rushing in from the hospital, crying to his mother, desperate now about this delivery, afraid his wife was going to die.

My mom doesn't remember her own mother. In poor health after giving birth to eleven children, she passed away in child birth when my mother was four years old. So, as she lay on the operating table, Mom had one thought in mind: the same fate now awaited her newborn baby girl. I know this, of course, because she did pull through -- thirteen blood transfusions later. The whole saga -- the crying, the bleeding, the surviving -- is one of my family's great stories now, more emotional with every telling. But in 1968, still recovering from her ordeal when *Humanae Vitae* was issued, my mother fumed at the thought that Rome would tell a woman preventing pregnancy was immoral, no matter the age or the circumstances. What could they possibly know about that?"

Please submit your comments and articles to: comments@tonyercolano.com