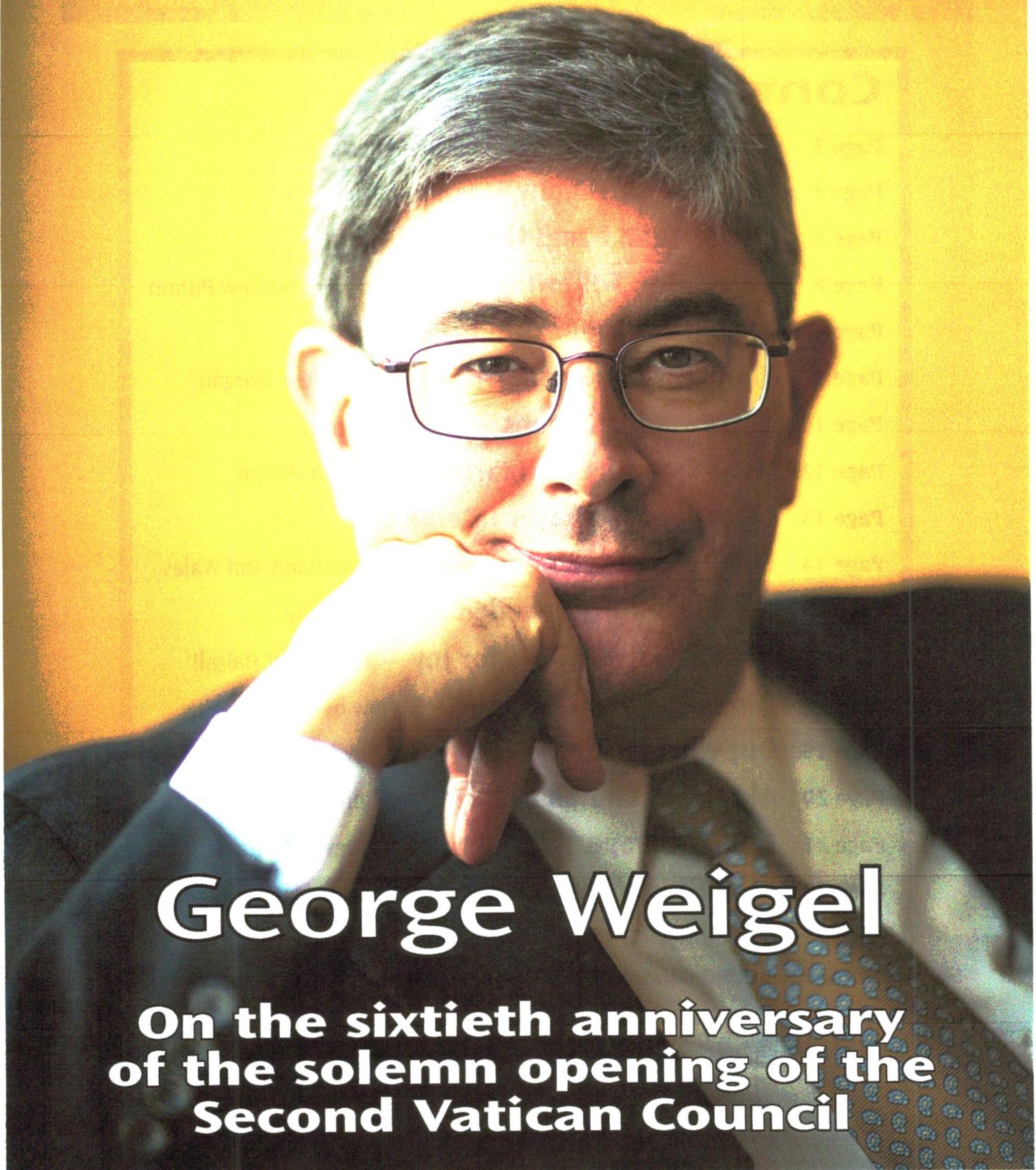


THE P RTAL

THE PORTAL is the monthly review of the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham
September 2020



George Weigel

**On the sixtieth anniversary
of the solemn opening of the
Second Vatican Council**

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Contents

- Page 3 **PORTAL Comment** – Will Burton reflects
- Page 4 **Anglican Patrimony** – Joanna Bogle
- Page 5 **Snapdragon bangs the drum again**
- Page 6 **Catechism: Following the light** – Fr Matthew Pittam
- Page 7 **Dynamic orthodoxy** – George Weigel
- Page 9 **Thoughts on Newman** – Revd Dr Stephen Morgan
- Page 10 **Two Catholic Queens** – Eliza Trebelcock
- Page 12 **News from the Ordinariate** – around the UK
- Page 13 **Calendar and Prayer Intentions**
- Page 14 **Finding us at prayer** – in England, Scotland and Wales
- Page 16 **A new painting unveiled** – Fr Simon Ellis
- Page 17 **One for Sorrow; Two for Joy** – Fr Michael Halsall
- Page 18 **Directory for Catechesis** – Review by Fr Simon Ellis
- Page 19 **Our window on the CofE** – The Revd Paul Benfield
- Page 20 **Aid to the Church in Need** – Fionn Shiner
- Page 21 **The Next Pope** – Review by Mgr Andrew Burnham
- Page 22 **Saint Pius of Pietrelcina** – Catholic On-Line
- Page 23 **CDF: Baptisms** – Vatican News

THE  PORTAL

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The case for dynamic orthodoxy

George Weigel

IN TWO years, the Catholic Church will mark the sixtieth anniversary of the solemn opening of the Second Vatican Council. Yet the debate over the meaning of Vatican II continues throughout the world Church. Some now openly charge that the very idea of a “pastoral” council was a grave mistake and propose that Vatican II should be quietly forgotten. Others continue to insist that the Church underwent a “paradigm shift” at Vatican II, as if something similar to the Copernican revolution that displaced Earth from the centre of the cosmos happened to Catholicism’s self-understanding between October 11, 1962 (when the Council opened), and December 8, 1965 (when the Council closed).

Neither of these proposals does justice to Pope St John XXIII’s intention for the Council. Neither does justice to the Council’s texts read properly. And neither seems aware that the living parts of the world Church today are those that embrace Vatican II in full, having read it in continuity with the Church’s settled tradition.

John XXIII summoned the Second Vatican Council to give Catholicism a new experience of Pentecost, so that the Church might enter its third millennium full of evangelical zeal. That zealotry, he understood, must embrace the Gospel in full. Yet ways had to be found to preach the Gospel in dramatically changing cultural circumstances, for John XXIII knew that the repetition of old formulas was insufficient for the work of evangelising modernity. At the same time, he knew that the old formulas contained important truths, so the task before the Church was to revitalise its understanding and presentation of those truths so that the men and women of late modernity could hear them. Thus John XXIII imagined his Council as one that would unleash a Christ-centered, dynamic orthodoxy in the Church, just as one of his heroes, St Charles Borromeo, had unleashed Christocentric dynamic orthodoxy in his archdiocese of Milan following the Council of Trent.

Christocentric dynamic orthodoxy of the sort that John XXIII described in his opening address to the Council would take full advantage of the important developments in Catholic theology and biblical study since the pontificate of Leo XIII (1878-1903). Those developments, however, would be understood, as just that, developments, in John Henry Newman’s sense of the term. And the fruitfulness of those developing understandings of the Gospel would be measured by their evangelical power: a true development of Catholic doctrine would draw men and women to Christ; a false development would paralyse the Church’s evangelical instincts.

The Council was thus a necessary, indeed essential, response to the challenge of living the Great Commission (Mt 28.19-20) under modern conditions. In John XXIII’s mind, however, the Church’s response to modernity had to be based on a firm conviction that divine revelation is real and binding over time. God, he believed, had not left humanity to its own devices. By entering history, first in his covenant with the people of Israel and later in the person of the Son, God had disclosed truths about himself and about us. That conviction was underscored by the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) and then encapsulated in the stirring affirmation of the Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*): “Christ the Lord...in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling.”

Convictions about the reality and binding authority of revelation began to weaken in some Catholic circles during the Council itself, and the results are very much among us today. They were evident, for example, at the Synod of 2015, when some churchmen argued that, as we know more about the psychological dynamics of human relationships than was known in the Lord’s time, we can adjust Christ’s teaching on the indissolubility of marriage (and thus on worthiness to receive holy communion). That argument was a striking example of the phenomenon I have been calling “Catholic Lite” for over a decade and a half.

Some of the more intellectually assertive proponents of Catholic Lite promote a Catholicism of indeterminate doctrinal and moral convictions and boundaries because they think that history judges revelation, rather than revelation judging history. Others, perhaps more numerous, propose Catholic Lite out of pastoral concern: doctrinal and moral clarity, they imagine, are off-putting and offensive in

times like our own. Whatever the motivations behind it, however, Catholic Lite seems a comprehensive failure throughout the world Church. The living parts of the Catholic Church are those that have embraced the Gospel in full and see in the Catechism of the Catholic Church a guidebook to human flourishing, happiness, and, ultimately, beatitude. The moribund or dying parts of the world Church are those that keep trying, despite the experience of the past fifty years, to make Catholic Lite “work.” It never does, though.

The most dramatic cautionary tale in this respect today is the Catholic Church in Germany. Wounded by Bismarck’s Kulturkampf, two world wars, and the Nazi experience, German Catholicism nevertheless made important contributions to the world Church in biblical studies, theology, liturgical development, and Church history. Yet after the Council the German Church took a deliberately Catholic Lite approach to theology, biblical exegesis, catechetics, and pastoral practice, and the sad results are now evident for all to see: a vast Church bureaucracy supported by tax monies maintains a façade of Catholic presence in society, behind which is the sad reality of disastrously low sacramental practice and a catastrophic decline in priestly and religious vocations. Now, German Catholicism is embarked on a national “Synodal Path” whose working documents are redolent of an even lighter Catholic Lite, leading to a Catholicism so weightless as to be indistinguishable from liberal Protestantism.

In sharp contrast to this pathetic picture of a well-funded, intellectually assertive, and self-destructing Catholicism is the vibrant Catholicism of sub-Saharan Africa. There, the Gospel has been proclaimed and received as the liberating force that it is. There, clarity of conviction is the essential foundation of missionary fervour and success. There, a New Testament experience of faith is being lived. Of course, clear conviction must be expressed with a compassionate understanding of the complexities of the human heart; but the living parts of the world Church, in Africa and elsewhere, understand that the most compassionate offer we can make to others is the offer of friendship with the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the answer to the question that is every human life.

Of course, the life of dynamic orthodoxy is one into which we grow over time, on a sometimes rocky road along which everyone fails on occasion; but the living parts of the world Church keep their gaze fixed on Christ and, like Peter before he started looking elsewhere and sinking on the Sea of Galilee in Matthew 14, are thereby empowered to do previously unimaginable things. Of course, dynamically orthodox evangelism keeps an open mind about the questions raised by non-believers; but the living parts of the world Church

base their pastoral practice on the truth that G.K. Chesterton once put in his inimitable fashion: an open mind, like an open mouth, should close on something.

“Progressive” Catholicism has perpetrated various fairy tales for fifty years now: that Vatican II began the Church anew; that all challenges to progressive Catholic theology are mounted by cold-hearted, pre-modern reactionaries; that doctrinal ambiguity is attractive; that “thinking for yourself” is a mark of Christian maturity. Every one of these claims, which are part and parcel of the Catholic Lite project, has been falsified by reality.

Three popes canonised by Pope Francis – John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II – have insisted that Vatican II’s texts emerged from, and must be read in light of, the Church’s settled tradition, or what John XXIII called in his conciliar opening address the “deposit of faith.” To think of critics of progressive Catholic theology like Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Ratzinger, Avery Dulles, and John Paul II as anti-conciliar reactionaries is simply silly. There is no evidence, anywhere, of doctrinal fuzziness being evangelically attractive. And it is a bedrock of Christian faith that we are called, not to “think for ourselves,” but to put on the mind of Christ, as St Paul instructed the Corinthians.

In my 2019 book, *The Irony of Modern Catholic History*, I proposed a fresh reading of Catholicism’s often-turbulent encounter with modernity, in which the Church, navigating that turbulence by attending to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and the signs of the times, eventually discovered the New Evangelisation. In my newest book, *The Next Pope: The Office of Peter and a Church in Mission*, I suggest how the Petrine ministry can and must empower all the people of the Church to be the missionary disciples described by Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* [The Joy of the Gospel]. In doing so, I hope to have pointed a path beyond both a nostalgia-driven ultra-Traditionalism in which the Church retreats into bastions of defensiveness, and a Catholic Lite approach that has, among other failures, fostered the moral confusions from which various corruptions have emerged, doing grave damage to the Church’s people and mission.

The path toward a vital Catholic future is the path of Christocentric dynamic orthodoxy, lived joyfully and with pastoral compassion and creativity. Recognising that path is a fitting way to mark the diamond anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. 🙏

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