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HISTORICAL MEMORIES and HISTORICAL GUESSES

***Theological & Experiential Cross Currents
From Aristotle to Jean-Luc Goddard***

**Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.**

T. S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

A "BEFORE" & AFTER "CONTEXT

I still read the Vatican II Document, *Gaudium et Spes*, with the Joy and Hope that the Latin title names.

Today the human race is passing through new a stage of its history. Profound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees through all the world. Triggered by the intelligence and creative energies of human life, these changes recoil upon us: upon our decisions and our desires, both individually and collectively—upon how we think and upon how we live. Hence we can already speak of a true social and cultural transformation one which has repercussions on our faith life as well. (34).

I was living in Europe during the last years of the Second Vatican council. We often had Council members stay with us Fribourg, Switzerland when there were breaks from their deliberations, and they often gave us conferences on the Council as it was unfolding.

It the midst of this Catholic excitement--indeed justified excitement—my Professor in Church History, the internationally known Dominican historian, Pere Marie-Herve Vicaire, gave us a somber reflection. Most Councils and Synods have been called to address serious social or theological problems. Precious few of them were called to move the Church with hope into a future that was perceptively changing.

Pere Vicaire recalled that such immensely hopeful Councils or Synods were met with immediate enthusiasm, but the new thinking and new ecclesial compartments soon frightened the Institution, and there was deep resistance to the called-for changes. He said that the Church often had to wait until most of those who knew the Church before the futuring Council would have to have returned to God before the Council could really take hold. Just maybe, maybe we are closer to that time!

I would like to track with some aspects of Christianity's intellectual life. There is some irony in the domination of Greek modes of thought. I will try to name it simply. Jesus and all his followers would have spoken Aramaic (the form of Hebrew in his time). Jesus would have taught in Aramaic, and his listeners would all have understood. In the Jewish religious understanding, the human vocation is to collaborate with God's intentions for how the world should look: justice, mercy, and charity should prevail in human history. ***The human calling is to collaborate with God's intention for human history.***

There is a stunning statement from the Second Vatican Council, in the fourth chapter of ***Nostra Aetate***, that God has never abrogated the Covenant He made with the Jews. They too are the People of God, like us. We can but barely ponder how differently Western history might have been

written if that conscious had informed us from early on. Perhaps Ferdinand and Isabella would not have expelled the Jews from Spain in 1492. Perhaps six million Jews would not have been killed on the Nazis 1939-1945.

If God has never revoked the Covenant he made with the Jews. Are there two Covenants? Is there one Covenant and we have not discerned an integrity? (We won't solve that one this evening, but we MUST come to terms with the breadth of God's love!)

GREEK INFLUENCE

We ponder the influence of Greek culture on early Christian developments. In the Greek world view, which gets Christianized but still keeps its character, human fulfillment on earth is experienced in the contemplation of God (in classical Greek it was the contemplation of beauty, truth, and goodness). I quote Aristotle on this issue:

. . . the rareness of it [contemplation] leads many to say that people like Thales and Anaxagoras are no doubt wise but lack common sense . . . They allow that their knowledge is 'exceptional', 'wonderful,' 'deep,' 'superhuman,' but they aver that it is useless [in the world] because it is not the good of humanity they explore. (***Ethics***, book 6)

Aristotle says that even though contemplation has no practical earthly value in the daily world, it fulfills **totally** any person's reason for existence. Contemplation doesn't build houses or solve problems, or connect us to history. But it rewards us with ultimate happiness. It has no communal character at all.

This is “top knowledge” for Thomas too, except that the contemplation of the true, the good, and the beautiful becomes the contemplation of God. It is for this alone finally that we exist, and it is in this that total human fulfillment is finally enjoyed in the **beatific vision**. The following reflections occur in Thomas’ tract *De beatitudine*, “Concerning Happiness” (II-II qq 3-4):

3, a.4 Human happiness consists in the knowledge of God, which is an act of the intellect.

3a, a.8 Happiness consists of nothing else than the vision of the Divine essence.

The active life, in fact, interferes with the contemplative life. But Thomas does say that activity can sometimes so tire us out that we get quiet enough to entertain contemplation, which we wouldn’t do if we weren’t that tired (II-II, q.182, a. 3).

In spite of a stark contrast with the indigenously Hebrew-Aramaic thought patterns of Jesus and his followers, the Greek version of human destiny has prevailed, and that needs to be named early. I find this stunning!

I think of the famous statement attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche, the renowned philosopher. Because of his fame, a huge crowd awaits his train arrival in Zurich. A platform is set up for him. He exits the train, steps to the platform, utters one sentence: “There is no such thing as an **uninterpreted** thought!” And then he leaves the deck. How differently Jews and Greeks interpreted human destiny!

The condition of theology often makes me think of T. S. Eliot’s remark in the **Four Quartets**—this is from “Burnt Norton”:

. . . **Words strain,**
Crack and sometimes break under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still . . .

HISTORICAL “DEDUCTIVE”TRAJECTORIES

Aristotle and Thomas

There is a significant anthropological divide between classical theology, based upon a Greek presupposition that contemplation is the highest achievement, and a Hebrew presupposition that historical agency collaborating with God’s intentions for human history and destiny in the world is the highest human calling.

Personally, I was born a “Greek” Catholic and somewhere along the line became a “Hebrew” Catholic (to name a transformation poetically!). Now you know my prejudices, which condition all that follows!

I begin with Aristotle’s ***Nicomachean Ethics***. In Aristotelian anthropology, there are three kinds of knowledge. First, there is the knowledge that is more skill-like: I know how to bake a cake, how to plant flowers, how to build a building. But I am not morally obligated to do those things just because I know how.

There is a kind of practical knowledge—and I call it practical (as did Aristotle) because it obligates us in our world. If I have knowledge that can promote the personal and/or the communal good, I—as a moral person--am not free to say Yes or No. I must help cure the world if it is saddened or make a better world, if I know how. These obligations are modified by energy and time, of course. No one can do everything one knows the world

wants to have done. But if people are starving and I know how to cook some stew, I am obligated to do it. When there are things needed for human life as necessity or perhaps even as serious enrichment of human life, people who can do these things **ought** to do these things, in keeping with possibility and resources. This kind of knowledge obligates me. Aristotle calls it *praxis*.

Lastly, the knowledge of God and contemplation of God is absolutely the highest form of knowledge, although few people actually achieve it. But for classical thought, it is to that kind of knowledge that we are called, and in which we find final human fulfillment. For the Greeks it is the contemplation of beauty, truth, and goodness. With the Judaeo-Christian tradition, it is the contemplation of God. I cite the words of Aristotle:

If happiness is an activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable to assume that it will be in accordance with the highest virtue, and this can only be the virtue of the best part of us . . . Now we have already seen that this activity has a contemplative nature . . . The form of contemplation does not aim at any end beyond itself. (*Ethics*, bk 6)

This contemplation in no way directs the practical life; it is unrelated to daily practical living. And also, it is the least commonplace kind of knowledge. All of this leads Aristotle to observe approvingly that while contemplation is the final form of highest personal fulfillment, it has no practical pay-off in daily living.

Thomas Aquinas agrees fully that the human contemplation of God is the highest fulfillment there is, and it is irrelevant to the normal everyday processes of human life. Thomas says that working really hard in daily life may finally be ultimately useful, if it so tires us out, that we become still, and are able to contemplate.

WHEN INDUCTIVE BUMPS INTO DEDUCTIVE

The first effective intellectual interruption for me personally of the pattern just described was in St. Louis where I was teaching high school, sometime around 1960 . Being the committed Scholastic thinker I had tried to become, I kept meticulous notes for all the high school religion classes I taught, so that I would never have to do them again. I had many thick folders of very, very, very detailed notes!

Then one evening I attended a lecture at St. Louis University by the French existentialist philosopher, Gabriel Marcel. He caught my fancy! I began reading his work, starting with *Homo Viator: Introduction to the Metaphysics of Hope*, and later *The Mystery of Being* (his Gifford Lectures in Scotland). Marcel regularly walks one through a great variety of experiences before finally suggesting some conclusions that the journey through experience seems to elicit. it was *inductive!* It was systematic, but not in the same way that Aristotle and Thomas were systematic—it had a stronger inductive motion.. Marcel invites an inductive approach to both philosophy and theology. He walks one through experiences, one by one by one by one, and *then* draws experienced-based conclusions

I could not have named it that way then, as I reckon with it now. But Gabriel Marcel had given me a penchant for leading from experience, personal and social, theology as well as philosophy. That was a new beginning for me: start with what experience discloses. I felt inductive kinship with the opening lines of T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*:

Let us go, then, you and I
 When the evening is spread out against the sky
 Like a patient etherized upon a table.
 Let us go, through certain half deserted streets,
 The muttering retreats
 Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels,
 And sawdust restaurants with oyster shells:
 Streets that follow like a tedious argument
 Of insidious intent
 To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .
 Oh, do not ask ‘What is it?’
 Let us go and make our visit.

That fits Gabriel Marcel keenly: “Do not ask what is it. Let us go and make our visit.” Then, perhaps afterwards, we can process the visit. I think that’s fine poetry. And I believe that it is sound philosophy and formidable theology. Let us go and make our visit! [Probably makes better homilies and sermons as well!]

A distinctively deductive tendency reasons from clear principles (Aristotle and Thomas). A decidedly inductive tendency (all the pragmatists and existentialists and phenomenologists) draws conclusions prompted by experience (including religious experience). That is perhaps overly simple, but it catches decisive differences. The 16th century scientific revolution gave Western Culture a large jolt in the direction of trusting (sometimes over-trusting) inductive approaches.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the works of the Modernists Alfred Loisy (French diocesan priest) and George Tyrrell (an Irish/English Jesuit) were condemned, and both were excommunicated. They understood the historicization of all human thought, the need for an historicized pondering of Jesus Christ and the beginnings of the Church. If

L'Eglise et L'Evangile (Loisy) and *Christianity and Crisis* (Tyrrell) are read now they perhaps suggest some modifications but do not, I believe, stir a crisis. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin also lived and suffered in the shadows of the Modernist controversy.

DEDUCTIVE / INDUCTIVE – AQUINAS / WHITEHEAD

Back to some history. After teaching secondary school in St. Louis, I entered the four year theology program at the Universite de Fribourg in Switzerland. For four years, during each semester, we had lecture classes every class day in Latin, on the **Summa** of St. Thomas (no other theology text in four years): one hour for Dogmatic Theology, a second hour for Moral Theology. Never once in four years did a student ask a question. We were some 150-200 students in the lecture hall.

I also hasten to express my immense, honest gratitude for the four years of Thomas—it would be dangerous to try to think theologically in Catholic culture without familiarity with that hugely formative tradition—I am very happy to have had that experience. I would say today that Thomas' tract on prudence is unparalleled.

This period in Fribourg coincided with the latter two sessions of the Second Vatican Council. During the Council recesses, Bishops sometimes stayed with us, and often gave conferences on what was occurring in the Council. The expressions "Vatican II Church" and "Pre-Vatican II Church" were quickly forged.

Also in Fribourg, scripture study began to bring to my attention some profound contrasts between Hebrew and Greek interpretations of the human calling. A **Christian** in intense prayer is often kneeling, is usually very, very

still, and usually totally silent. Stillness. Silence. Rapport with God is minimally interrupted by practical concern. Valuing this kind of contemplative quiet is commonplace in Catholic life. A **Hebrew** engaged in intense prayer, however, is often in motion, swaying back and forth, and accompanied with quiet but audible sounds--which is what one sees and hears when Jews pray before the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, and often as well in the synagogue. I have seen them and joined them in prayer in both settings. Stillness is one model of ultimacy, movement another!

For Hebrews, God has intentions for history and we are asked to be prime collaborators with God so that history comes out right. Solid practical instincts are crucial:

This is what YHWH asks of you,
 only this,
 that you act justly,
 that you love tenderly,
 and that you walk humbly
 with your God."
 (Micah 6:8).

I admit it: I began as a Greek Christian and ended up a Hebrew Christian, a transition that took a while.

The half year that I later lived and taught in Jerusalem was crucial. (Contemplation does not enter the Hebrew scene with power until the Middle Ages, reflecting the impact of medieval Greek thought on the Hebrew mind.) I also spent a sabbatical year at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles.

But back to Fribourg. Still in Theology in Fribourg, and bit on the sly, I enrolled also in the Philosophy program, for a course in Kant. When Professor Joseph Bochenski (***Philosophy: An Introduction***) arrived, he said there was a mistake—the course was not to be on Kant, but on the

Anglo-American philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead (whom he had known personally). This was my first exposure to process philosophy, and it grabbed me by the nape of my neck! In addition to the Baccalaureate degree in Thomas, I earned a Licentiate in Contemporary Philosophy, with a thesis on Whitehead's understanding of God. For me, this was a paradigm shift of breadth and depth, at a personally strategic intellectual moment.

Whitehead has a way of being inductively empirical, yet with poetic imagination. I cite him:

The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and again it lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation (PR, p. 7).

This is clearly “empirical,” and there is also room for imagination, but always rechecking imagination with experience. Imagination is provoked by experience. Experience is elucidated by imagination. It's empirical, but not sense-bound as in the empiricism of David Hume. Whitehead's process philosophy clearly flagged my attention, and quickly made me wonder whether process theology might be a response to process philosophy.

In this same time-frame I also had a course on Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which had just appeared in English translation. This was the beginning of conversation with the hermeneutical tradition (although he is not clearly counted among the “hermeneuts”). Now I shift focus but not topics.

Shortly after returning to the United States from Fribourg, I entered doctoral studies at Graduate Theological Union at the University of California in Berkeley, which I chose because of its offerings in process theology, with

Bernard Loomer, one of the leading Whitehead scholars. My dissertation was on a process theological interpretation of liturgy and sacrament, which, in modified form, became my first book, *The Becoming of the Church*. I would not have used the language then, but it was an exercise very close to practical theology, as I have later come to understand it.

What I have been trying to name is the extent to which Catholic thought and Catholic identity were forged in classical modes of thought and behavior: Stoic, Platonic, Neo-Platonic, Aristotelian, Thomistic, neo-Thomistic. The intellectual side of things was profoundly indebted to the brilliance of Greek imagination and thought

But that uniformity was being subjected to increasing challenge from a radically historicized understanding of human thought. The “meta-“ of metaphysics was being called into question. All thinking is conditioned. All thinking is biased. All thinking has breadth. All thinking has limitation. Reality outruns thought and language. Maybe mega-physics (large construct) but not meta-physics (all encompassing construct).

The historicizing of all human thought is as sharp a reminder of human finitude as can be imagined. Do we favor “being” or do we favor “process” as starting points? It is T. S. Eliot who again comes to mind for me, from *Burnt Norton*, the first of the Four Quartets:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance. And there is only the dance.

The dialectic between the still point and the dance is ancient. Eliot says to keep them both intact. **But**, “there is only the dance.” Eliot is a fairly classical thinker. That “there is only the dance” is singularly moving from such a classical thinker, who yet hangs onto the “still point” as well.

I will note now another movement in my theological life, that is also reflective of the larger movements in Western Christianity. Peter Eichten, Nancy Dallavalle, Andrew Sleeman, Mike Cowan and I and a few other of our graduate students (I remember Gary Jarvis) did some serious reading together of Whitehead’s *Process and Reality*, and Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (not all of us on each of the topics). Christian Brother Bob Smith sometimes joined us from Minneapolis, a splendid conversation partner.

I wish to acknowledge the theological debt I owe to my colleague and friend Michael Cowan, and the conversation that has never stopped. I remember when we worked on our first book together. We had notes on very many 3X5 cards, and we grouped cards in piles on the floor that seemed to hang together on clearly emerging topics, and each separate pile of cards became the material for a chapter in the first book we wrote together, ***Dangerous Memories***. (I think we still throw cards of the floor.)

After that, Mike Cowan and I reconnected at Loyola University, where he joined me as a faculty member. It was then in our time together at Loyola University that Mike and I took on Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Hermeneutics is a vital intellectual, discipline. What it addresses is how we interpret experience, for—again--there is no such thing as uninterpreted experience. Hermeneutics is an insistent reminder of the conditioned nature of all experience and all processing of it intellectually and emotionally.

It is humbling to become profoundly aware of how much otherness there is in a sentence that comes from another era and another set of presuppositions. “A hermeneutically trained consciousness,” writes Hans Georg Gadamer, “must be, from the start, sensitive to a text’s alterity,” its otherness (*Truth and Method*, p. 269). No small part of the human enterprise is coming to terms with our creaturehood and our conditioning. But when we do, it “opens the way to an appropriate understanding of our finitude which dominates not only our humanity but our historical consciousness” (*Truth and Method*, p. 276). This is a humbling realization, and it does not come easy to an ecclesial tradition which has canonized its utterances, before such profound historical consciousness of all human utterances took hold.

I would like to see a Papal Encyclical (just kidding!) that included Bernard Loomer’s sense of the conditioned nature of all thinking and speaking. I often use a story I learned from Professor Loomer in my Berkeley student days.

After intense study with a master, a young Buddhist monk goes off to his own Himalayan mountain seclusion. After five years alone, and plagued by an insistent question, he returns to his Master monk to ask, “What does the world rest on? What keeps it up?” The master says, “Let me pray over the question. Return in an hour.” When the young monk returns the Master says that the world rests on the back of a very large elephant. The young monk thanks the master and returns to his solitude. Five years later he returns to ask what the elephant’s feet rest on. The Master needs longer prayer, and then says that the elephant’s feet are on an even larger world. This goes on and on: a larger elephant on a larger world on a larger elephant. When the no-longer young monk hears that his master is dying, he hastens back and asks one last question: “Please tell me before you die, what does the bottom elephant’s feet stand on.” The very old

monk whispers, “If I knew that, I would know everything.” And he dies.

The moral of the story is that every system of thought rests on a bottom elephant that doesn’t rest on anything else. It’s just there. That doesn’t by itself challenge the validity of systems, but re-LA’-ti-vizes all of our forms of truth-gathering. Historical consciousness is no minor conditioner when it really takes hold—when we let it take hold. It is a humbling perspective indeed.

The issue is the non-overcomeable conditioning of all modes of thought, and the difficulty of privileging one of them in respect to all the others of them. That, I believe, is the final position of post-modernity.

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

The logic of practical theology is clear. How we understand anything has consequences for how we are with *it*—whatever *it* is—in the world. Our knowledge has consequences—actual and/or imagined, and the consequences are part of our knowledge’s meaning structure.

Practical theology is often difficult to understand in U.S. culture because the word “practical” frequently signals “plain old common sense” applicability, rather than Aristotle’s sense that understanding is shaped by the real or imagined consequences of what we know. Real or imagined consequence belong to the structure of meaning. ***That will be practical theology: thought in touch with and shaped by its consequences, real ones, or prudently imagined ones.*** Post-modern will affirm the irreducible pluralism of ways of interpreting the world. But it is very user-friendly, I believe, to practical theology

There are similarities between practical theology and Aristotle's description of phronesis/praxis—both are attuned to knowledge's possible consequences. There are multiple descriptions of practical theology, largely consonant with one another—the key feature is that the consequences of what we know—real or imagined—belong to the meanings of what we know.

In American culture, the expression “practical theology” is, for a lot of people, interchangeable with pastoral theology. “The old idea that practical theology is simply hints and tips in ministry dies hard” (Forrester, p. ix). Practical theology consorts with Aristotle's understanding of phronesis/praxis more than with William James and John Dewey (at least popularized understandings of these American thinkers).

Gerben Heitink says that “practical theology as a theory of action is the empirically oriented theological theory of ***the mediation of Christian faith in the praxis of modern society***. (Heitink, p. 6, emphasis added). Terry Veling says that “Practical theology is more ‘verb like’ than ‘noun like.’ So a better question would be, ‘What does it mean to practice theology?’

Two urgencies are collaboratively at work here: that God's presence to the world in Jesus Christ accosts the world day in and day out, and that responsiveness to that accosting is not optional. Practical theology is sensitive to this.

I greatly appreciate David Tracy's articulation of practical theology:

Theology is the discipline that articulates mutually critical correlations between the meaning and truth of an interpretation of the Christian fact and the meaning and truth of the contemporary situation.

Here's how I put it today (which does not differ greatly with some of the descriptions I have already cited):

**Practical Theology
is a mutually critical conversation
between interpretations of our faith
and interpretations of
our personal and social situation(s),
that elicits strategies
which promote the reign of God.**

**All understandings have consequences,
both imagined and enacted;
and those consequences belong
to the very structure of our understanding.**

**Communities of inquiry-and-action
are a privileged location
for the exercise of practical theology.**

Once again, there is a strong resemblance between this understanding of practical theology and Aristotle's description of *phronesis/praxis*. I think that Hannah Arendt has understood most clearly that this does not devalue contemplation, but understands the somewhat rare contemplative encounter with "other," whether "other" is God, or another human being, as transformative. The contemplative encounter passes, but, as Teresa of Avila makes clear, one never sees in the same way after that experience. While practical theology does not give contemplation finality as a human experience, it understands with reverence and conviction that the contemplation of God, not unlike contemplative moments in human relationship, is relationally transformative, a transformation that impinges on all experience, not just the contemplative moment.

POST-MODERNITY

I conclude with a word about post-modernity.

Practical Theology is in many ways a response to the hermeneutical awareness that all experience is interpreted experience, and that every interpretation has consequences, real or imagined, and that those consequences belong to the meaning structure of what we come to know. There is just no naked uninterpreted experience.

All interpretations of experience have bottom elephants that don't stand on anything!

Included in any interpretation are the effects of interpreting something in that particular way. But it's a rare person who is regularly and keenly aware of the function of interpretation in the creation of experience. David Tracy may be the only one that instantly comes to mind! (besides my colleagues gathered here!). Every interpretation has consequences, either real or imagined, and those consequences contribute to the meaning of what is known. One can easily see how critically dialogue becomes essential to the civility of our communal life together.

When the conditioned nature of experience, understanding, articulation and conduct radically takes hold of human understanding, post-modernism is then present. I cite Jean-Francois Lyotard's observation (in his book ***The Postmodern condition: A Report on Knowledge***).

“. . . I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences, but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds notably the crisis

of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied upon it (p.xxiv).

Jean-Francois describes the philosophical, theological and religious world in which I pitch my tent, and rightly senses that there are consequences for how Catholic universities have understood themselves.

I think it worth creating a new word, ***mega-narrative, or perhaps megaphysics, instead of metaphysics*** for all encompassing narrative, for a truly large and effective interpretive system, but not large enough to interpret everything everywhere within a single system of understanding. The conditioned nature of experience and articulation does not appear to allow that.

These are, of course, not issues plaguing parishes or preoccupying Chancery offices, or are even sufficiently challenging to Catholic higher education (which is where this must transpire). These are issues rarely addressed in University courses, even in graduate theology programs (as far as I can tell), But I know they are indeed seething beneath the surface in national Catholic Theological and Philosophical Organizations. And I do not doubt their gradual surfacing. Hans Kung keeps whispering it in our ears! (I take that back—Kung never “whispers.”)

One of the things about Catholic culture that I have relished is its high regard for the intellectual life—for faith seeking understanding. We survived the Modernist crisis (for the most part); and the issue of postmodernity is ***not unrelated*** to the modernist controversies.

And I presume that all these words that I have uttered at best participate a little in a raid on the inarticulate. Who could ever articulate God!

I believe that practical theology and postmodernity will have a ball, albeit with some very intricate new dance steps that will have to be learned.

And that, family, colleagues, friends, is all I have to say this evening.

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In earlier drafts of my reflections, this is where I concluded. But some things have been stirring in institutional Catholicism, that incline me to add a wild guess. **It’s speculative and risky to offer as a clear judgment, but maybe a surmise worth pondering. Here goes.**

I now recall a “sort of admonition” from my Church history Professor, the renowned Dominican Church Historian, Marie-Herve Vicaire, at the Universite de Fribopurg in Switzerland where I did seminary... It was the 1964-65 academic year, while the Second Vatican Council was in session, and hopes and excitement were sky high. In the midst of the exhilaration, Pere Vicaire sounded a note of caution.

Most Church Councils and Synods were called to address troubled times or greatly disputed issues. Only relatively few, he said, were called for updating, for deliberately and seriously moving forward. These Councils, Pere Vicaire observed, created huge initial and responsive excitement. But then, fear took hold as the changes took shape, and there were long periods of retrenchment. Only when the Church finally worked those reactions out of its system could the reforms really get underway.

The excitement after Vatican II is still vivid for those of us old enough to remember the before and after. Mass in Latin. Eucharist in English. Sometimes the closing music at Eucharistic Liturgy was “Let the Sun Shine

In,” from the raucous musical, “Hair.” Adults did them too—and certainly young adults.

But soon in the 90s and beyond, there were pull-backs and hesitations. We know the story. I then remembered Pere Vicaire’s comments from 25 years earlier.

Now I am not yet sanguinely optimistic. But hopeful that that new era might be (somewhat, at least) immanent.. There are some interesting recent movements. A significant number of priests in Austria have formed a new organization with members from both diocesan clergy and religious orders, pushing for some major reforms in both theology and practice. Also in Germany. There is a similar recent organization of priests in the United States, and now also in Ireland (with considerable lay responsiveness to them). The Vatican investigation of American Religious women is stirring wide interest, as well as considerable out-loud support for these remarkable women. At its recent meeting in St. Louis in early June, the Catholic Theological Society passed a resolution in support of religious women in this country.

The 12,500,000 young adult Catholics in this country are an interesting group. They identify as Catholic, even though only 16-20% of them are regularly active. But they still claim Catholic identity! I have a lot of them in my classes at St. Mary’s University. I wonder whether they are waiting.

So I wonder, I really wonder, if perhaps the reaction is out of our system (or getting there), and whether the Second Vatican Council is perhaps about to happen. Maybe we have worked some resistances out of our system. My interaction with young adults suggests that it’s a possibility worth

pondering. I do not know whether this is a reasonable idea to entertain, or just “a consummation devoutly to be wished.”

I conclude with a passage from Henry Nelson Wieman’s book, *The Source of Human Good*:

We must be broken because there is a good so great
it breaks the bounds of our littleness.

We must be broken because there is a power
which works in our lives to achieve a good
we cannot compass and cannot discern,
until some later time in retrospect
reveals the form of a new creation
now visibly emerging.

We must be broken because there is a God
who works for righteousness so great
that it cannot be confined
to the limits of our control.

We must be broken because there is, day by day,
the creating of a kingdom of goodness
in depth and height and scope
so far beyond the reach of any human plan
that it must not be constricted
to our imposed directive.

We must be broken because above us,
Above the breakdown and the ruin,
Of plans and reasons and ages and nations
There is a beating of great wings.

I stop here!

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