

The Lake Garda Statement

On the Ecclesial and Civilizational Crisis

Preamble

Among the Catholic faithful the conviction grows that the ongoing crisis in the Church and the drastic moral decline of our civilization have entered a critical new phase which represents a turning point in the history of the world.

In the Church, a Synod on the Family has devolved into a battle to defend the indissolubility of marriage from an attack within, pitting cardinal against cardinal and bishop against bishop. The Synod has produced a midterm *relatio*, approved by the Pope himself, which calls for the admission of divorced and remarried Catholics to Holy Communion on a “case by case” basis without any renunciation of adulterous relations, contrary to the explicit teaching of Pope John Paul II in line with the perennial discipline of the Church.¹ The same document speaks of “valuing” the “homosexual orientation” while recognizing the “precious support for the life of the partners” supposedly provided by “homosexual unions.”² Bishop Athanasius Schneider rightly observes that “[t]his is the first time in Church History that such a heterodox text was actually published as a document of an official meeting of Catholic bishops under the guidance of a pope, even though the text only had a preliminary character.”³

In Ireland, a popular referendum has legalized “gay marriage” in that once exemplary Catholic country, while in the United States a bare majority of the Supreme Court has imposed “gay marriage” on all fifty states. Yet the Pope and the Vatican observe a resounding silence. At the same time, the Vatican hosts conferences on climate change with notorious atheists who advocate population control and “sustainable development goals” (SDGs) that would only oppress ordinary people, including the poor, while leaving untouched the hegemony of multinational corporations which, in fact, are working with the United Nations to fashion a worldwide SDG regime. The Vatican itself has endorsed a SDG calling on member nations to “ensure universal sexual and reproductive health and rights.”⁴

As the nations descend ever more rapidly into an abyss of depravity, the Pope has issued a 185-page encyclical on an ecological crisis that diverts attention from the catastrophic collapse of sexual morality in a civilization ridden by divorce, contraception, and abortion. As to abortion, the encyclical speaks of the “human embryo” in the context of “concern for the protection of nature,” while earlier lamenting the extinction of plant and animal species as a loss to our children and a diminution of the glory owed to God.⁵

Echoing the belief of many Catholics, Bishop Schneider has stated that we are in the midst of the “fourth great crisis” in Church History, involving “a tremendous confusion over doctrine and liturgy. We have already been in this for 50 years.”⁶ In this context the Roman Forum, founded by the late Dietrich von Hildebrand, has decided to issue this Statement on the ecclesial and civilizational crisis, calling upon the leadership of the Church, above all the Supreme Pontiff, to return to the path from which much of the human element of the Church has strayed since the Second Vatican Council. Because we believe this twin

¹John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), n. 84.

²“Relatio post disceptationem” (official Italian translation), nn. 47, 50, 52 @ vatican.va.

³Interview with LifeSiteNews, November 5, 2014.

⁴Voice of the Family, “Vatican endorsement of UN development goals threatens unborn children,” LifeSiteNews, April 30, 2014; accessed at <https://www.lifesitenews.com/opinion/vatican-endorsement-of-un-development-goals-threatens-unborn-children>.

⁵Francis, *Laudato si* (2015), nn. 33, 120.

⁶Sarah Atkinson, “Bishop Athanasius Schneider: ‘We are in the fourth great crisis of the Church’”, catholiceraid.co.uk, June 6, 2014.

crisis is *Christological*, not ecological, we call in particular for a recovery of the Church's traditional teaching on the Social Reign of Christ the King as the only sure remedy for the temporal and spiritual ills that now threaten both the Church and human society.

Introduction

Only eleven years before the commencement of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Pius XII issued a prophetic admonition. Speaking of the long history of the Church's members "using every endeavor to convert their fellow citizens to the religion of Jesus Christ and to fashion their morals according to its pattern, so as to safeguard both religion and the state from approaching danger," Pius XII urged a renewal of missionary activity in the face of the rising specter of a civilizational apostasy and its fatal consequences:

Venerable Brethren, you are well aware that almost the whole human race is today allowing itself to be driven into two opposing camps, for Christ or against Christ. *The human race is involved today in a supreme crisis, which will issue in its salvation by Christ, or in its dire destruction.*⁷

Pius XII's assessment, in line with that of his predecessors in the Church's long confrontation with the errors of modernity, was abruptly abandoned after the Council in favor of the now prevailing "conciliar optimism" regarding what *Gaudium et spes* described as the "current trend of the world."

Within the Church, moreover, we have witnessed during the post-conciliar epoch what the future Pope Benedict XVI famously described as "a continuing process of decay that has gone on largely on the basis of appeals to the Council, and thus has discredited the Council in the eyes of many people."⁸ An ill-defined ecumenism promotes what Pope Pius XI called "a most grave error, by which the foundations of the Catholic faith are completely destroyed"---meaning the idea that Christian unity no longer requires "the return to the one true Church of Christ of those who are separated from it"⁹---as if membership in the Catholic Church no longer mattered for the salvation of souls. A perpetual process of "dialogue" replaces the Church's forthright proclamation of the necessity of conversion to the one true religion for both human flourishing in this life and eternal happiness in the life to come. Along with these developments, an unprecedented liturgical reform devised by a committee has ended with what Cardinal Ratzinger called "the collapse of the liturgy"¹⁰ and later, as Pope Benedict XVI, the "banalization of the liturgy."¹¹

Although the traditional teaching is still to be found in the Church's official documents, in practice churchmen appear to repudiate her divinely bestowed status as the *axis mundi*, along which all earthly things are ordered to the glory of God and the transcendent common good of eternal beatitude. This alarming tendency, described as if it were an eminently favorable "opening to the world," has taken its toll on all aspects of the life of the Church, including the focus of this Statement: Catholic social teaching on the duties of men and nations to Christ the King and the dire consequences of failing to honor those duties in personal, civic, and political life.

The Authentic Social Teaching

The authentic social teaching of the Catholic Church has constantly reminded the faithful of their divinely imposed duty to attend to the needs of the poor according to the universal destination of earthly goods and in obedience to Our Lord's injunction: "Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of

⁷Pius XII, *Evangelii Praecones* (1951), n. 70. Emphasis added here and throughout.

⁸Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *L'Osservatore Romano*, November 9, 1984, later to be known as *The Ratzinger Report*.

⁹Pius XI, *Mortalium Animos* (1928), n. 10.

¹⁰Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Milestones*, p. 148.

¹¹Benedict XVI, Address to the Clergy of Rome, February 14, 2013.

the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”¹² No merely human organization has ever excelled the Church in her care for the poor, even if this is not her primary mission on earth. But nowhere does she enjoin upon the faithful any duty to submit the administration of justice and charity either to an “invisible hand” or to regulatory bureaucracies controlled by men without faith who are more often than not oppressors of the poor under the guise of defending their rights. We see the consequences of such submission, for example, in the grinding poverty of Latin America, where global capitalism has callously exploited labor and “liberation theology” has fomented violent revolution while liberating no one.

Catholic social teaching obliges us to recognize and oppose capitalist individualist materialism as well as socialist collectivist materialism. Both lack the proper sense of Catholic and natural order and both have been brutally disrespectful of Christian morality and God’s earth. Globalist capitalism, enabled by governmental privileges and protections, as well as militant appeals to “American exceptionalism,” has gained much favor in conservative Catholic circles. On the other hand, millenarian socialist programs, involving such elements as “sustainable development goals,” worldwide regulatory regimes, and intrinsically anti-Christian juridical frameworks, including the United Nations, are now regaining favor with the aid of the current pontiff. Both are equally destructive to a proper grasp of how to deal with the real problems of the family, the civic order as a whole, universal peace, and the environment. For both equally neglect the crucial context of man’s destiny as the only creature possessed of an immortal and rational soul in need of grace for redemption, perseverance in the avoidance of gravely evil conduct, and the ultimate attainment of eternal beatitude---the highest good to which all earthly activities should be ordered. Thus, as Pope Leo XIII stressed in his landmark social encyclical *Rerum Novarum*:

*Life on earth, however good and desirable in itself, is not the final purpose for which man is created; it is only the way and the means to that attainment of truth and that love of goodness in which the full life of the soul consists. It is the soul which is made after the image and likeness of God; it is in the soul that the sovereignty resides in virtue whereof man is commanded to rule the creatures below him and to use all the earth and the ocean for his profit and advantage. “Fill the earth and subdue it; and rule over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and all living creatures that move upon the earth.”*¹³

The Church’s True Appeal to Men of Good Will

Respecting society’s observance of the universally applicable moral principles embodied in Catholic social teaching, the popes before the Second Vatican Council never wavered in their insistence that by virtue of her divine founding and universal mission the Church has the unique capacity to establish that brotherhood among men which is otherwise a utopian dream destined to produce dystopian outcomes.

The Church has never ceased to issue an appeal to all men of good will who, by the light of natural reason, seek the good and deplore the evils that assail human society in our time. This appeal, however, ought not to be confused with an indiscriminate collaboration with secular leaders whose plans and sociopolitical and economic structures so often show themselves to be inimical to the eternal values that men of good will naturally recognize. It is, rather, an invitation to enter into the way of the Catholic Church, where seekers of truth will find what they seek in superabundance. This is no mere “triumphalism,” but rather a joyful recognition of the incomparable goods, both natural and supernatural, that God bestows upon humanity through His Church. The Church does not reject the world, but rather seeks its perfection in grace.

As Pope Pius XI declared in *Ubi Arcano Dei* (1922), his great encyclical on “the peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ,” the Holy Catholic Church is “by divine institution the sole depository and interpreter of the ideals and teachings of Christ” and “she alone possesses in any complete and true sense the power effectively to combat that materialistic philosophy which has already done and, still threatens, such

¹²Matt. 25:40.

¹³Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), n. 40.

tremendous harm to the home and to the state.” Accordingly, it is the Church, and *only* she, that “is able to set both public and private life on the road to righteousness by demanding that everything and all men become obedient to God...”¹⁴

As Pope Pius X declared, concerning misguided efforts to entangle the Church in worldly undertakings for the promotion of a universal brotherhood, if “the highest possible peak of well being for society and its members is to be attained through fraternity or, as it is also called, universal solidarity, all minds must be united in the knowledge of Truth, all wills united in morality, and all hearts in the love of God and His Son Jesus Christ. But this union is attainable only by Catholic charity, and that is why Catholic charity alone can lead the people in the march of progress towards the ideal civilization.”¹⁵

Today, however, the Church’s leaders present her role as merely that of proposing a “contribution” to a vast and quite hopeless neo-Pelagian project in which the United Nations or some other “world political authority” would serve as the juridical framework for a solidaristic world order in which “believers,” regardless of religion, and unbelievers would be co-equal participants. This project is directed, not upward toward Heaven for the salvation of souls, but forward in history toward a godless, hopeless, and painfully trite City of Man falsely lauded as a “civilization of love” or a “renewal of humanity.”

But the truth is that the Catholic Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ, *is* the renewal of humanity, a renewal made possible only by the translation of fallen men into the state of sanctifying grace and the consequent elevation of human society to heights it could never attain by any purely human effort. Thus it is the world that is obliged to contribute to the work of the Church. Yet we witness with amazement a historically sudden inversion of the proper order of things in the Church’s approach to her mission in human society.

Whither the Social Kingship of Christ?

With all of these considerations in view, we must ask: What has happened to the Church’s certitude concerning her exclusive and divinely ordained role in the right ordering of human affairs and the fostering of true brotherhood among men? Have the Church’s leaders forgotten that her founder is God Incarnate? Have they somehow misplaced the divine commission to “make disciples of all nations”?¹⁶ Do they still believe the defined dogma that the Church is the sole ark of salvation? Are they still mindful of Our Lord’s warning: “without me you can do nothing”?¹⁷ Do they no longer have confidence in His promise: “But seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and His justice, and all these things will be added unto you”?¹⁸

If the worldwide breakdown in social order could in any respect be characterized as an ecological crisis, how could it be anything but a manifestation of a deeper *Christological* crisis—a universal mutiny against Christ and the Law of the Gospel lamented by pope after pope before the emergence of the inexplicable conciliar optimism? In a return to the sober realism of his predecessors, who are now belittled as “prophets of doom,” Pope Benedict warned in an address to the clergy of Rome, less than two years before the abrupt end of his pontificate, that the “fundamental consensus derived from the Christian heritage” has been lost, the “place of moral reasoning... is taken by an instrumental rationality,” “the most elementary rules of humanity collapse” and with the consequent “eclipse of reason... *[t]he very future of the world is at stake.*”¹⁹

¹⁴Pius XI, *Ubi Arcano Dei* (1922), nn. 42-43.

¹⁵Pius X, *Notre Charge Apostolique* (1910)

¹⁶Matt. 28:19.

¹⁷Jn. 15:5.

¹⁸Matt. 6:33.

¹⁹Benedict XVI, Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia, December 20, 2010.

The fate of the world in every epoch since the Incarnation has been bound up with the state of the Church. The Church's power to renew the face of the earth involves not only a restoration of faith, hope and charity in the souls of men, but also the defense of natural reason against the onslaughts of sophists in every age. She alone has upheld the correct synthesis of *fides et ratio*.²⁰ The Church's success in accomplishing this mighty work throughout history has always depended upon her vigor in advancing what she calls the Social Kingship of Christ. But it is precisely Christ's social reign that the "modern world" has rejected, while churchmen fall silent regarding the claims of Christ the King on men and nations. Today, she not only retreats from any confrontation with "the rulers of the world of this darkness" and "the spirits of wickedness in the high places,"²¹ but seeks obsessively to dialogue and collaborate with the very forces that desire nothing more ardently than the Church's final surrender to the spirit of the age.

And yet the truth remains. As Pius X insisted at the turn of the 20th century: "Society cannot be set up unless the Church lays the foundations and supervises the work; no, civilization is not something yet to be found, nor is the New City to be built on hazy notions; it has been in existence and still is: it is Christian civilization, it is the Catholic City. It has only to be set up and restored continually against the unremitting attacks of insane dreamers, rebels and miscreants. OMNIA INSTAURARE IN CHRISTO."²²

In remarkable contrast, the prevailing mentality that is at the root of the ecclesial crisis considers the conviction of this sainted Pope to be nothing other than an idyllic fantasy---even though it reflects the form and pattern nurturing and guiding our entire Christian civilization. Lost on the exponents of this facile rejection of the Social Kingship doctrine is the irony of their own ideological pursuit of what Pius X called "a mere verbal and chimerical construction in which we shall see, glowing in a jumble, and in seductive confusion, the words Liberty, Justice, Fraternity, Love, Equality, and human exultation, all resting upon an ill-understood human dignity" and producing, were it ever to be realized, "a Democracy which will be neither Catholic, nor Protestant, nor Jewish. It will be a religion... more universal than the Catholic Church, uniting all men [as] brothers and comrades at last in the 'Kingdom of God'...."²³

Conclusion

The conversion of nations to Christ and trust in Divine Providence are the twin pillars of any truly just society. Yet, after fifty years of an imaginary ecclesial "renewal," the generality of the Church's leaders appear to have repudiated in practice the duty to seek the conversion of nations, as if they believed that social metanoia were now impossible even for God. Behind this loss of militancy is a dimming of the Faith itself. In his masterwork on the post-conciliar crisis, *Iota Unum*, the great Romano Amerio observed that "Faith in Providence thus proclaims the possibility that the world might rise and be healed by a metanoia which it cannot initiate but which it is capable of accepting once it is offered."²⁴ That offer must come from the Church, as it has in every age when the collapse of civilization was reversed in miraculous fashion under her supernatural influence.

The ecclesial crisis and the intimately related civilizational crisis will end only when the Church's offer of social metanoia is renewed once again. But only the Vicar of Christ can effectively extend that offer to the world. Only he can end what amounts to an unprecedented de facto suspension of the Church's true mission in the name of a Council whose restless "spirit," moving far beyond even the problematical conciliar texts, has produced what Benedict XVI, speaking just days before his mysterious abdication of the papacy, described as "so many disasters, so many problems, so much suffering" in the Church.²⁵

²⁰Cf. FIRST VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, Ch. 4: On Faith and Reason; John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, n. 6.

²¹Eph. 6:12.

²²Pius X, *Notre Charge Apostolique*.

²³Ibid.

²⁴*Iota Unum*, p. 761.

²⁵Benedict XVI, Address to the Clergy of Rome, February 14, 2013.

Therefore, we implore the reigning Roman Pontiff to reverse the Church’s course of the past fifty years, abandoning a disastrous “opening to the world” and an endless “dialogue” and fruitless collaboration with the Church’s implacable opponents. With respect to the Synod, we urgently petition the Pope to put a stop to all further efforts to use the synodal process to undermine the indissolubility of marriage—and thus the entire moral edifice of the Church—by means of a sophisticated disjunction between doctrine and practice, making a mockery not only of the words of Our Lord Himself but also of the teaching of John Paul II that “only by the acceptance of the Gospel are the hopes that man legitimately places in marriage and in the family capable of being fulfilled.”²⁶

And finally, we beseech the Roman Pontiff to fulfill his duty as Vicar of Christ and Universal Shepherd by leading the way to a restoration of the continuity between the Church’s venerable teaching on the Social Kingship of Christ—never repealed—and the practice of churchmen both high and low. This is in accord with the new Catechism of the Catholic Church, which recalls the sacred obligation of Catholics to evangelize their fellow citizens and work for the transformation of social order in keeping with Christ’s kingship:

By constantly evangelizing men, the Church works toward enabling them “to infuse the Christian spirit into *the mentality and mores, laws and structures of the communities in which [they] live*. The social duty of Christians is to respect and awaken in each man the love of the true and the good. It requires them to make known the worship of *the one true religion which subsists in the Catholic and apostolic Church*. Christians are called to be the light of the world. Thus, the Church shows forth *the kingship of Christ* over all creation *and in particular over human societies*.”²⁷

For these intentions, we make our own the Lord’s prayer for the first Pope, which surely also applies to every one of his successors, especially in this age of unparalleled diabolical disorientation: “And the Lord said: Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: *and thou, being once converted, confirm thy brethren*.”²⁸

Mary, Help of Christians, Pray for Us!

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²⁶*Familiaris consortio*, n. 3

²⁷*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 2105.

²⁸Lk. 22:31-32.