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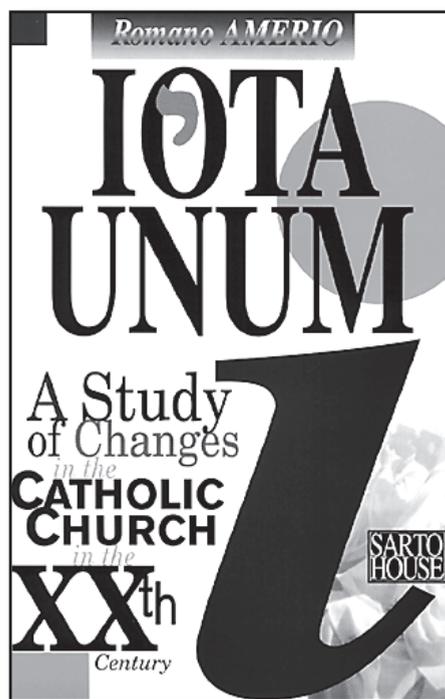
THE ANGELUS ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ARTICLE REPRINT

Let your speech be "Yes, yes: no, no"; whatever is beyond these comes from the evil one. (Mt. 5:37) • September 2009  
Reprint #88

## Romano Amerio and the Crisis of the Catholic Church in the 20th Century

The whole of *Iota Unum*, the masterpiece of Romano Amerio and one of the most important works of Catholic theology in the 20th century, is, in the author's eyes, vindicated by one undeniable fact: the extremely serious crisis the Church has been undergoing, a crisis the Philosopher of Lugano does not hesitate to define as the most serious the Church has ever experienced. The attack, essentially perpetrated by men who belong to the Church's hierarchy, comes from within and not without.

For Amerio, however, the crisis of the Catholic Church is an absolutely obvious fact, which it would be madness to deny, and which, moreover, as is true of every fact, cannot be demonstrated, but only shown. It is not a question of deducing it from a series of logical steps, but of seeing the reality as it is and of self-training in intellectual honesty that allows one to call everything



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by its right name, the name that fits, expressing a thing's true essence.

In keeping with the first principle of his methodology, which is never to impose one's own ideas or personal opinions on reality, Amerio prefers to rely upon the words of the Pontiffs who have on several occasions declared the gravity of the crisis. Here are the most famous declarations quoted in *Iota Unum*:

In his speech to the Lombard College in Rome on December 7, 1968, Paul VI said: "The Church is in a disturbed period of self-criticism, or what would better be called self-demolition. It is an acute and complicated upheaval which nobody would have expected after the council. It is almost as if the Church were attacking herself."<sup>1</sup> In the famous speech of June 30, 1972, he said "that from somewhere or other the smoke of Satan has entered the temple of God." In the December 7, 1968, speech he went on: "In the Church too, this state of uncertainty reigns. It was believed

that after the council a sunny day in the Church's history would dawn, but instead there came a day of clouds, storms and darkness."<sup>2</sup>

John Paul II, at a conference on missions, described the state of the Church in these terms:

We must admit realistically and with feelings of deep pain, that Christians today in large measure feel lost, confused, perplexed and even disappointed; ideas opposed to the truth which has been revealed and always taught are being scattered abroad in abundance; heresies, in the full and proper sense of the word, have been spread in the area of dogma and morals, creating doubts, confusions and rebellions; the liturgy has been tampered with; immersed in an intellectual and moral relativism and therefore in permissiveness, Christians are tempted by atheism, agnosticism, vaguely moral enlightenment and by a sociological Christianity devoid of defined dogmas or an objective morality.<sup>3</sup>

As for the cause of the crisis, Paul VI unhesitatingly links it to internal problems within the Church itself: "A great range of these evils do not assail the Church from without, but afflict it, weaken it and enervate it from within. The heart is filled with bitterness."<sup>4</sup> In another passage quoted by Amerio from Paul VI's speech of November 16, 1970, the Pope depicted the unhappy state of the post-conciliar Church:

It is for everyone a cause of surprise, pain and scandal to see that within the Church itself there arise disturbances and unfaithfulness, often on the part of those who ought to be most loyal and exemplary because of the commitments they have made and the graces they have received.<sup>5</sup>

He also mentions "doctrinal aberrations," "a casting aside of the authority of the Church," a general moral license, a "lack of concern for discipline" among the clergy.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the author quotes an exemplary document of utmost importance by the one who was then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger, published by *L'Osservatore Romano* of November 9, 1984: "The results of the council," he said,

seem cruelly to contradict the expectations everybody had, beginning with John XXIII and Paul VI: it was expected to produce a new unity among Catholics, but instead dissension has increased to a point where it has moved from self-criticism to self-destruction....It was expected to produce a leap forward, but we have been confronted instead with a continuing process of decay that has gone on largely on the basis of appeals to the council, and has thus helped to discredit the council in the eyes of many people. The result would therefore seem negative....It is undeniable that this period has been decidedly unfavorable for the Catholic Church.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the theological and more strictly doctrinal aspects of the crisis, Amerio never tires of underlining that the key characteristic of the post-conciliar crisis comprises two closely linked elements: **1)** the crisis results from an attack led by forces within

the Church, in particular within its hierarchy, and by entire episcopal conferences; **2)** the attack against Church doctrine is conducted by clerics who remain within the Church.

In *Iota Unum*, Amerio not only bases his arguments on the words of the popes who have recognized and denounced the crisis with the greatest lucidity while trying to understand its causes, but he also adduces other facts that show the painful state of the Catholic Church, which we enumerate briefly: **1)** the defection of priests by the tens of thousands, with a great many priests reduced to the lay state by Paul VI; **2)** the unprecedented defection of monks and nuns, with whole orders, once glorious, drastically reduced in membership; **3)** the collapse of religious vocations among women; **4)** the collapse of regular Sunday Mass attendance; **5)** the referendum on abortion in Rome in 1981, in which only 22 percent of voters opposed its introduction; **6)** the doctrinal crisis revealed in a poll published by *L'Osservatore Romano* in November 1970, in which 50 percent of persons calling themselves Catholic stated their disbelief in heaven and in hell; **7)** the collapse in the number of conversions of Protestants and Jews after years in which their number had significantly increased, especially in the United States.

## The Causes of the Crisis in the Church in Amerio's Analysis

*Iota Unum* is not a systematical work: its many chapters are not organized following a precise hierarchy of importance or of methodological, philosophical or theological priority. But there are, in our opinion, five overarching, closely linked main themes that can guide the reader: Pyrrhonism, dogmatic mobilism, the principle of dialogue and ecumenism, democracy in the Church, and the failure of authority.

### Pyrrhonism

The theme of Pyrrhonism, named after Pyrrhon of Elis (c. 365-275 B.C.), the most important Sceptic philosopher of the Hellenistic Age, is based on Amerio's observation of the fact that, starting with Vatican II, the crux of every aspect of the crisis is to be found in a general *crisis of faith*. It is based on the presence of scepticism regarding the truths of faith within the members of the Church and even the hierarchy.

Amerio asserts that a widespread scepticism, permeating the sentiments of churchmen, is at the root of crisis:

Underlying the present confusion there is an attack on man's powers of cognition, an attack that has implications for the metaphysical constitution of being in general and of primal Being as well, that is of the Holy Trinity. We will call the attack by its historically expressive name of Pyrrhonism;

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it is something that attacks the very principle of all certainty, not merely this or that truth of faith or reason, since what it impugns is man's capacity to know any truth at all.<sup>8</sup>

It is Romano Amerio the profound student of modern thought speaking here. He identifies the underlying epistemological weakness of modern thought: Because of its fundamental naturalist presupposition, it cannot keep the link between the knowing subject and the object known within the limits of metaphysical realism, and results in antimetaphysics, scepticism, immanentism, and subjectivism. In fact, the *Zeitgeist* dominating 20th-century philosophical thought for the last fifty years also pervaded Catholic thinking: this defection from a strong, realist, rigorous idea of man's cognitive capacity (in short, the dislocation of theological reflection from a firm Thomistic, scholastic conceptual basis) rendered the Church's task of teaching authoritatively much more difficult by enclosing it within a kind of intellectual ghetto in which teaching could only be proposed if couched in sufficiently interrogative or dubitative expressions that lessened its value and scope.

For Amerio, this is the deepest, most crucial aspect of the crisis; it can be said that in his analysis all the other elements of the crisis stem from this first and decisive weakening, not to say collapse, of a sound metaphysical vision. In effect, the consequences of the scepticism that permeates post-conciliar Catholic thought at every level, from the Popes to simple priests and faithful, are far-reaching indeed, for the phenomenon constitutes a *dislocation* of the Blessed Trinity.

This epistemological and metaphysical Pyrrhonism explains, in Amerio's analysis, the primacy of *praxis*, that is to say, of will and action, in modern thought. Moreover, if doubt about our faculty of cognition is already, implicitly, a kind of *atheism*, it is obvious that Catholic thought cannot accept being contaminated by modern thought without being corrupted: in other words, either Catholicism is *realist* in metaphysics or else it deviates. If "the root of the confusion in the world and the Church is Pyrrhonism, that is the denial of reason," no "friendship" or "sympathy" with modern philosophical systems will be possible, nor any incorporation of these systems into Catholic theology. In effect, how can the Catholic hierarchy teach with the requisite firmness if it has internalized the sceptical doubt proper to moderns concerning man's capacity to know?

One of the clearest proofs adduced by Amerio of the new relativist mentality, and of the sceptical style employed by the hierarchy, is the way the catechisms now state the doctrine of the Church: whereas the Catechism of St. Pius X (or any other earlier catechism) authoritatively states the articles of faith to be believed (for example, Art. 104: "How long will heaven and hell last? Heaven and hell will last eternally"), the post-conciliar catechisms set forth, not

what must be believed, but what the Church teaches must be believed (for example, Art. 1035: "The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity"). It is unnecessary to underline the extraordinary difference between these two ways of expressing the same truth: in the first case an objective truth is presented as such by expressing the nature of things; in the second case, the content is presented by underlining that it is an element of Church teaching, thus relativizing it and cloaking it, albeit implicitly, with a patina of scepticism.

Amerio then remarks:

If one denies the capacity of our intellect to form concepts corresponding to the real, the more the mind is unable to apprehend and conceive (that is take with itself) the real, the more it will develop its own operation within itself by producing (that is bringing forth) mere excogitations. These latter will be occasioned by something that touches our faculties but is not present in the concept which we form of it. Hence come all the ancient and modern sophisms that trust in thought while at the same time lacking any confidence that we can grasp the truth.

If thought does not have an essential relation with being, it is not subject to the laws governing being and ceases to be measured because it becomes itself the measurer.<sup>9</sup>

### Dogmatic Mobilism

One immediate and inevitable consequence of philosophical Pyrrhonism is dogmatic mobilism: if nothing can be known with certitude, it is obvious that even truths long held and taught will not be able to escape a fundamental scepticism, with modern thought as its impassable horizon. Since many churchmen and faithful no longer have the capacity to consult the *depositum fidei*—unchangeable dogma—the Church has passed from the order of certitude to the order of probability in matters of faith in fifty years. Dogmas are not formally denied, but interior adhesion, the assent of the intellect and will, no longer possesses the radical and absolute character that ought to characterize the faith of a believer in immutable Truth. Amerio calls this new attitude of theologians and the faithful towards the articles of Catholic doctrine *dogmatic mobilism*. In modern thinkers, a philosophy of Heraclitean extraction has emerged, with the primacy of *becoming* and history over *being*; "the mentality that values becoming more than being, motion more than rest, action more than the goal,"<sup>10</sup> the active virtues over the contemplative virtues,<sup>11</sup> both in theology and in religious practice.

Citing a great many quotations, Amerio shows the increasing importance and widespread acceptance even in the Catholic world of this vision of the truths of faith and of being in general as a reality *in fieri*, going so far as to introduce becoming within God Himself and to deny the Word, "that is, ...that the

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forms of created and creatable things exist eternally in God.”<sup>12</sup>

Amerio shows us that the destruction of the very idea of the immutability of dogma also overturns the domain of moral theology by opening the door to the negation, or the progressive subversion, of the key idea of the Catholic system: the eternity and immutability of the moral law.

Once dogma has been dissolved in an historicist vision, once the natural law has been dissolved, dogmatic mobilism issues in the primacy of *praxis*, that is to say, in what could rightly be considered a form of *implicit atheism*. The harmonization with the modern world, which in philosophy is modeled on Hegelian dialectic, can only lead to a very grave crisis in the Church because modernity is founded upon the impossible independence of dependents, on the finite absurdly taken to be infinite as *causa sui*. This deviation is what Amerio calls “the loss or inversion of essences,” resulting in “a dislocation of the divine Monotriad,” that is to say, in the conceptual violation of the Trinity itself.

Among the numerous violations of Catholic Tradition committed after Vatican II by many theologians and churchmen, perhaps none has had more serious consequences than this one, because it undermines the defense and the transmission intact of the deposit of faith itself, which is no longer thought of in light of the immortal principles established by St. Vincent of Lerins. The historicization of dogma, its slow erosion and alteration conducted on the basis of an illegitimate and heterodox hermeneutic, has finally led to what could be called a *faith without dogmas*, a faith increasingly emptied of stable, firm, and certain doctrinal content. That is tantamount to saying that the life of many Catholics is henceforth marked by a relationship with a Protestant-style life of faith, taken in a sentimental and subjective fashion.

Amerio is categorical: “Within the Church too, the idea has caught on that changeability is a positive quality and should be accepted; it has replaced the ideas of stability and immutability. The religious injunction remains clear nonetheless: *Stabiles estote et immobiles*.”<sup>13</sup>

## The Principle of Dialogue and Ecumenism

Epistemological and metaphysical scepticism: Nothing whatsoever can be said to be known with absolute certitude; truth, even in the domain of religion and doctrine, thus can never be considered as fully possessed, and everything must be considered as in a state of becoming, as historical, as precarious and uncertain: *dogmatic mobilism*. But if even the Catholic Church does not possess the truth in a stable, immutable way; if, on the level of morals, only *the search for truth* has value and dignity; and if

the very idea of the stable possession of truth is, in general, presented with quasi contempt, it follows that the only culturally acceptable Church will be a *dialoguing* Church, one that is not searching for truth but incessantly discusses everything, “problematizes” itself and its constant teaching, and, notably, refuses to condemn error (for the condemnation of error is essential to teaching but is excluded from dialogue):

The new-fashioned mentality abhors anything polemical, holding it to be incompatible with charity even though it be in reality an act of charity. The idea of polemics is inseparable from the opposition between truth and falsehood. A polemic is aimed precisely at overthrowing any pretended equality between the two. Thus polemic is connatural to thought, since it removes errors in one’s own thinking even when it fails to persuade an opponent. From the Catholic’s point of view, the end of dialogue cannot be heuristic, since he is in possession of religious truth, not in search of it.<sup>14</sup>

As on every other topic, Amerio abounds in pertinent quotations on dialogue, and it should never be forgotten that his file of documentation stops midway through the 1980’s (when the theme of dialogue had not yet reached its zenith in Church praxis).

With his customary linguistic genius, the philosopher speaks of the “discussionism” that has entered the Catholic Church and spread with impressive speed. Although the principle of dialogue can lay claim to no tradition nor to any support in Sacred Scripture, but springs from Vatican II, Amerio shows us that it is henceforth the common denominator of every ecclesial initiative, to the point that dialogue with heretics or schismatics seems to be more important than pastoral action for the sake of the Catholic faithful (or rather, it is as if the pastoral dimension has been absorbed by and reduced to the continual search for dialogue and confrontation with every kind of heterodoxy), contradicting the word of the Gospel: “*Erat docens eos sicut potestatem habens*—He was teaching them as one having power” (Mt. 7:29).

Teaching, and not dialogue, Amerio reminds us, is the normal form of the relationship between the Church and the world, and the notion that dialogue is but a modern, coded, covert form of teaching, a teaching under the more benevolent and conciliatory guise of a serene discussion of opposing themes, is untenable. In effect, in Amerio’s analysis, Catholic doctrine is not the equivalent of a philosophy or a science or a human activity for which it is natural to search with others by means of a progressive process of argumentation, dialogue, and refutation, for it is founded on divine Revelation itself, and it has, in the person of the Sovereign Pontiff and in the Church, a guide assisted by the charism of infallibility.

Amerio also points out that dialogue with heretics cannot be productive for the simple reason that the two interlocutors do not share the same principles:

Secondly, there is the situation where instead of helping the participants, dialogue presents them with an impossible task. St. Thomas envisages the case in which it is impos-

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sible to prove the truth to the person one is addressing because there is no jointly held principle on which to base the argument. All that can then be done is to prove that the opponent's arguments are not conclusive and that his objections can be met.<sup>15</sup>

If it is true that *principia negantibus non est disputandum*, Amerio is right to underscore the fruitlessness of ecumenical dialogue, the impossibility of its producing concrete results through its unending process of discussion, which saps the conviction with which the Catholic people holds its faith (for, how can one firmly believe what is incessantly subjected to the heat of critical exchange and dialogue for decades with those who belong, for example, to a Protestant sect or some other confession?).

Moreover, Amerio masterfully observes that, for a Catholic, dialogue implies the fact of his assuming a position either of real doubt concerning his own faith or of a pretense of doubt solely for the purpose of engaging in "dialogue" (since it is impossible to have an effective inquiring dialogue if one of the parties takes the position of possessing absolute and inalienable certitudes). But in both cases, there are serious consequences:

But the difficulty returns: if the doubt or rejection of faith is real, it implies a loss of faith and a sin on the part of the believer. If it is hypothetical or feigned, the dialogue is flawed by a pretense and rests on an immoral basis.<sup>16</sup>

In the analysis of the Philosopher of Lugano, there are particularly moral objections to ecumenical dialogue, based on the fact that with the choice of the method of dialogue comes the accompanying rejection of the attempt to convert persons in error or heretics; for there is a failure to perform the spiritual works of mercy that consist in instructing the ignorant and correcting the sinner:

We may conclude by saying that the new sort of dialogue is not Catholic. Firstly, because it has a purely heuristic function, as if the Church in dialogue did not possess the truth and were looking for it, or as if it could prescind from possessing the truth as long as the dialogue lasted. Secondly, because it does not recognize the superior authority of revealed truth, as if there were no longer any distinction in importance between nature and revelation. Thirdly, because it imagines the parties to dialogue are on an equal footing, albeit a merely methodological equality, as if it were not a sin against faith to waive the advantage that comes from divine truth, even as a dialectical ploy. Fourthly, because it postulates that every human philosophical position is unendingly debatable, as if there were not fundamental points of contradiction sufficient to stop a dialogue and leave room only for refutation. Fifthly, because it supposes that dialogue is always fruitful and that "nobody has to sacrifice anything" [*OR*, Nov. 19, 1971], as if dialogue could never be corrupting and lead to the uprooting of truth and the implanting of error, and as if nobody had to reject any errors they had previously professed.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, it should be noted that in Amerio's analysis, the principle of dialogue and "discussionism" are not envisaged as goals but as means, the real goal being ecumenism, which,

according to his reading, is the most significant and most serious development in the Catholic Church during and after the Council, and which flows directly from the "loss of essences," the heart of the new-fangled theology.

Amerio's critique is based in particular on the magisterial act synthesizing the Church's traditional doctrine on relations with non-Catholics: the *Instructio de Motione Ecumenica* of December 1949, reiterating the four principles that must guide Catholics in this matter: **1)** The Catholic Church possesses the plenitude of Christ; **2)** union should not be sought by way of progressive assimilation or by compromising Catholic dogma; **3)** true union can only occur *per reditum* of the separated brethren to the true Church of God, which is the Catholic Church; **4)** the separated who return lose nothing essential in entering into the Catholic Church.

If these principles are abandoned, which has largely happened during the post-conciliar period, according to Amerio, the aggravation of the evils afflicting the Church will ensue because ecumenism in the new sense (the Catholic Church and non-Catholic confessions are bearers of partial truths and must converge in the *Una Sancta*, towards a new *Church of the Spirit*, in which they will mutually complete each other) is the anti-principle of Catholicism, and in reality of the faith in general, which is the full adherence to a truth proposed and affirmed as absolute.

In the sequel to *Iota Unum*, the work *Stat Veritas* published in 1997, Amerio assessed the effects of ecumenism of recent decades with even more clarity and firmness:

In order to come to the conclusion that conciliar and post-conciliar ecumenism is a false, or at least incomplete, ecumenism, it suffices to notice that the actions of the separated brethren have not been actions that caused them to advance on the path to Catholicism, but actions that took no account of the faith, or which contradicted the faith; some were even actions that excited worldwide interest, such as the ordination of women. These events contradict the optimism of all those today who wish to consider that the ecumenical movement has borne good fruit. It hasn't borne any fruit. On the contrary, it has sown confusion among the multitude of the faithful.<sup>18</sup>

Besides, how could we fail to recognize the solidity of the reasons for Amerio's scepticism? He emphasizes several times that the problem can be reduced to the heretic's *habitus*—to believe only what my reason or my feelings consider as worthy of belief; whereas it is a Catholic principle to believe in virtue of the Authority belonging to the one who enjoins me to believe: the Church, and in the last instance, Christ Himself. It is stating the obvious to recall that if heretics do not abandon the principle that makes

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them heretics, all ecumenical dialogue, however long, will be fruitless.

## Democracy in the Church

The whole of Chapter XXXIII of *Iota Unum* is devoted to the subject of democracy in the Church, which is closely linked to the subjects analyzed so far. Pyrrhonism, dogmatic mobilism, and the primacy of dialogue require as their corollary and culmination adherence to ideological democratism.

The profound problem is the relationship of the Church with the French Revolution and the principles inspiring 1789: liberty, equality, fraternity. Amerio observes that the basic idea governing the French Revolution, and in its aftermath modern political philosophy, is its antimonarchical essence. The idea that “the exercise by one person of the right to govern society in accordance with the requirements of justice, ceases to be a legitimate species or form of government, and is to be regarded as illegitimate” has been widely spread and become common; but naturally it involves a sophism demolished in St. Pius X’s great encyclical *Our Apostolic Mandate* on the Sillon (regarding Christian Democracy and liberal Catholicism).<sup>19</sup>

For Amerio, this essentially anti-Christian idea that democracy would be the only form of legitimate government, that it would constitute the type of all legitimate government, penetrated the Church and infected it at every level of the hierarchical ladder.

But against this *democratist* deviation, Amerio observes that the Church as a *perfect society of divine right* is a monarchy and will eternally remain such because it is the *form* that our Lord Himself wanted to give it. *Iota Unum* reminds us moreover that the attack on the supreme monarchical authority of the Sovereign Roman Pontiff comes through the exorbitant role given to the national episcopal conferences, which hinder, when they do not completely impede, the autonomy of decision-making and power of every bishop such that it becomes very difficult for bishops to act and decide against the direction set by their episcopal conferences.

Amerio’s critique is developed along a two-pronged argument: in the first place, show the intrinsic weakness and the groundlessness of the democratic idea as such, by rejoining the Catholic polemic of the 19th century; secondly, he goes into detail about the functioning of the episcopal conferences, and shows that they irremediably alter the bishop’s traditional role (of divine institution):

The second consequence [of the introduction of episcopal conferences] is the stripping of authority from individual bishops; they are no longer directly accountable to the Holy See or to their own people: individual responsibility is being replaced by a collegial responsibility which is dispersed throughout the whole body and cannot be located

in any one member. In episcopal conferences, decisions are taken by two-thirds majorities, but although this may ensure unity of action, it still leaves the minority at the mercy of the majority.<sup>20</sup>

In Amerio’s vision, the acceptance of the sophisms of modern democracy as normative even for the Catholic hierarchy has certainly weakened the unity of the Church, placing more than one episcopal conference in a pre-schismatic state<sup>21</sup> (insofar as papal pronouncements on matters of faith are continually discussed, critiqued, subjected to the judgments of the conferences themselves, as if the validity of a magisterial act of the pope depended on or required approbation of the episcopal college). But on the other hand, democratism and parliamentarism have weakened authority at every other level, since every priest, *monsignore*, expert, episcopal vicar, theologian, Catholic university professor, abbot, *etc.*, finds his authority hobbled by a tightly woven network of councils, synods, meetings, assemblies, encounters, polls, indications, deliberations, *etc.*, which ultimately wear, consume, and exhaust the moral and intellectual qualities necessary for making decisions (and decision-making being one of the supreme acts of the intellect and will, that is to say of freedom, that a man can do, democratism first and foremost breaks the humanity of the Church’s men).

## The Failing of Authority

All the elements analyzed so far have as a common foundation and outcome one single reality: *the destruction of the principle of authority*. We are not speaking about one more element, but the very heart of modernity since Luther. If modernity can be conceived of as *revolution*, that is to say the European civil war against *Christianitas*, its essence consists precisely in the ideological aggression and practical destruction of the principle of authority.

Amerio sees—correctly, in our opinion—in this demolition of the traditional idea of authority as it had always been conceived of in the Catholic world, the keystone of the crisis in the Church. In effect, the Church is hierarchical and founded on the principle of authority by its very nature, inasmuch as it is founded, not on man, but on God and His Revelation, on His Law and His Word. It is *from above*, from God Himself, that the Church’s power to govern, to teach, to educate the nations, to preach, and to sanctify individuals and nations descends. To attack the idea of authority and of hierarchy is tantamount to removing the cornerstone that supports the entire edifice: a Catholic Church with a Pontiff deprived of even a part of his authority or who renounces the full exercise of his powers is wounded to its very heart.

Unfortunately, recent decades of the Catholic Church’s existence have been deeply affected by the radical questioning of pontifical authority: the process, which Amerio several times calls “*breviatus manus*,” consisted in the weakening of the Vicar of Christ’s

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power, resulting in the renunciation or practical impossibility of his pronouncing sanctions, punishing delicts, reproving or publicly denouncing evil.

But, with great simplicity and his habitual clarity, Amerio reminds us that a society cannot subsist without the power to impose sanctions, and the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, is and remains a society even if she is divinely founded and assisted. The failing of authority is the supreme problem because error, if it is not combatted with the greatest firmness, can only spread.<sup>22</sup> But in the Amerian perspective, after the Council the very possibility of defining error as such, and heresy as heresy, disappeared: the very words used for centuries to condemn have disappeared, subjected to a kind of unprecedented linguistic genocide.<sup>23</sup> Amerio lists a few of the “disappeared” terms: orthodox, orthodoxy, heretic, error, sin, hell, *etc.* But the list is much longer and includes dozens of words.

In *Iota Unum*, the failing of authority is also closely linked to the problem of the character and psychology of Montini, or, if you will, to his way of interpreting his role:

Now, the peculiar feature of the pontificate of Paul VI was the tendency to shift the papacy from governing to admonishing or, in scholastic terminology, to restrict the field of preceptive law, which imposes an obligation, and to enlarge the field of directive law, which formulates a rule without imposing any obligation to observe it. The government of the Church thus loses half its scope, or to put it biblically, the hand of the Lord is foreshortened.<sup>24</sup>

Amerio cites some exemplary, and rightly famous, instances of the failure of authority: the opposition to the Dutch and French catechisms ending with Rome’s capitulation, and the opposition over Küng and its very lenient conclusion for the theologian about whose faith and orthodoxy serious doubts were—and are—allowed.

Amerio makes the following observations about the crisis of the very idea of authority and of the idea of the Roman Pontiff in particular:

The renunciation of authority is not merely a prudent bending of a principle in the light of contemporary circumstances: it has instead itself become a principle. The Prefect for the Congregation of the Clergy, Silvio Cardinal Oddi, admitted as much at a conference of eight hundred members of “Catholics United for the Faith” held at Arlington in the United States in July 1983. The Cardinal admitted that there was confusion about the faith and said that many catechists today choose certain articles of the *depositum fidei* which they are going to believe, and abandon all the rest. Doctrines such as the divinity of Christ, the virginity of the Mother of God, original sin, the real presence in the Eucharist, the absoluteness of moral obligation, hell and the primacy of Peter are publicly denied by theologians and bishops in pulpits and in academic chairs.<sup>25</sup>

This passage, which is first and foremost a proof of the fact that Amerio really constructed his *Iota Unum* by relying only on statements taken from the speeches and acts of the most important

representatives of the hierarchy, is followed by a lapidary commentary worth citing:

Charity is held to be synonymous with tolerance, indulgence takes precedence over severity, the common good of the ecclesial community is overlooked in the interests of a misused individual liberty, the *sensus logicus* and the virtue of fortitude proper to the Church are lost. The reality is that the Church ought to preserve and defend the truth with all the means available to a perfect society.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

What is the great lesson given us by *Iota Unum* and the exemplary Catholic life of its author? We can summarize it as follows: on the one hand, in extreme times of very great crisis such as those in which we are living, the need of critique, of a vigilant and attentive, circumspect and prudent life of faith so as to avoid being devoured by these shepherds who are not “good,” but who rather are “mercenaries”; on the other hand, the requirement that this critico-prudential stance be joined to the most intense charity and sincere fervor: all reflection on the crisis in the Church that is not animated by an intense desire for personal sanctification is in vain.

Perhaps the Church, in the disquieting words of Paul VI, “will be a handful of defeated men”; perhaps Amerio is right when, in the majestic and terrible epilogue of *Iota*, he speaks of the “emptying and abasement” of the Church, a Church almost back in the catacombs and reduced to humanly discouraging existence, a Church condemned to practical extinction within the limits of the “*non praevalent*,” and which challenges the faith of even the most sincere and fervent believers, the most desirous of personal sanctification, to recognize in its face disfigured by sin and the treason of many the intact face of the mystical Spouse of Christ, and thereby enduring the same trial as that lived by Mary and St. John on Calvary, recognizing in the disfigured face of the Crucified the face of the Savior, the face of the Man-God.

The great lesson given us by *Iota Unum* is: against all human hope, to hope; against all incredulity, to believe; in extreme solitude, to be comforted by the peace the Lord gives, not as the world gives, but a mysterious and secret peace that prepares within hearts the place wherein may shine the steady, undying light which alone illumines and fortifies.

When will the Church be resplendent once again in all her strength and purity? We do not know. But we do know the nature of the seduction that caused and directed the entire crisis: the seduction that can be placed in the Amerian category of *secondary Christianity*, that is to say, the idea that the Christian

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faith derived its legitimacy from its ability to produce culture and progress on the civil and purely human level:

...the Church is setting aside its specifically supernatural nature, and blending its mission with the task of advancing civilization, fitting itself in as a help towards a more just and brotherly world. The aim is to create a *civitas hominica* without denying a higher *civitas dominica*, but the links between the two are deliberately loosened with the aim of establishing a purely humanitarian world order.<sup>27</sup>

### Matteo D'Amico

Translated for Angelus Press from the *Courrier de Rome*, February 2009, pp.1-6.

<sup>1</sup> Romano Amerio, *Iota Unum: A Study of Changes in the Catholic Church in the XXth Century*, tr. from the Second Italian Edition by the Rev. John Parsons (1985; Kansas City: Sarto House, 1996), §7, p.6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, February 7, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Speech of September 1974, *Iota Unum*, §77, p.173.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, §78, p.174.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, §324, p.731.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, §147, p.335.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.336.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, §161, p.360.

<sup>11</sup> Which could be defined as an arrogant return of *Americanism*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.366.

<sup>13</sup> "Be firm and stand fast" (I Cor. 15:58). *Ibid.*, §159, p.361.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, §154, pp.352-3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, §155, p.354.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, §156, p.355.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.356.

<sup>18</sup> Romano Amerio, *Stat Veritas: A Sequel to Iota Unum* (Milan-Naples: Ricciardi Editore, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> On democracy, the French Revolution, and the persecution of the Church during the Revolution, see A. Reyne and D. Brehier, *Les martyrs d'Orange: La persécution des catholiques dans la France jacobine*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, §233, p.525.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* Amerio speaks of "a pre-schismatic state of affairs."

<sup>22</sup> It should be recalled here that the abdication of authority, understood as the refusal to condemn error, was already implicit and even announced in the John XXIII's famous inaugural speech opening Vatican Council II, October 11, 1962.

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<sup>23</sup> For an in-depth study of the theme of the destruction of the language of traditional Catholic theology, cf. M. d'Amico, "Typologie de la crise présente: Le principe du dialogue et l'Église catholique—la catastrophe de la raison," in *Les crises dans l'Église: Les causes, effets, et remèdes*, Acts of VII Theological Congress of *SiSiNoNo* (Publications Courrier de Rome, 2007), pp.285-356.

<sup>24</sup> Amerio, *Iota Unum*, §65, p.144.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, §68, pp.152-3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.153.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, §299, p.667.