

THE WORLD/LIBERATING THE CHURCH:  
PERSPECTIVES ON THE 1991 ACADEMIC CONFERENCE THEME IN REVERSE

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The title of this presentation, "Liberating the World / Liberating the Church," reverses the theme of this year's *Academic Conference*, which is, "Liberating the Church / Liberating the World."

I wish to note that my reversing the theme of the *Academic Conference* might be interpreted as introducing a dichotomy between world and church, between secular and sacred. Equally, I also wish to point out that the *Academic Conference's* theme might be interpreted in a similar way. For, on the one hand, the theme of the Conference might point to a New Christendom where so-called 'lay' or secular Catholics -- graced through the sacred activity of the official Church ministers -- are called to sacralize the world and, thus, to transform it. On the other hand, my thematic reversal might suggest that -- by encountering God's liberating grace in the world -- Catholics are now equipped to liberate the Church and, thus, to transform it. Consequently, in both cases, Church and world appear dichotomized, standing apart from one another. As a result, in one way or in another, Catholics go from point A to point B or from point B to point A and, in both instances, they remain dichotomized!

However, within the purview of a theology of creation -- which is my own theological approach -- my reversed title ("Liberating the World/Liberating the Church") situates the Church *within*, and *not apart*

from, the world. From the perspective of creation theology, *redemption* or *salvation is human liberation*. In turn, human liberation consists in living out the awareness that one has that God's liberating grace of creation permeates the whole world. As a result (and I paraphrase James Cone in his book, A Black Theology of Liberation), the Church truly *redeems* or *saves* (itself included) where and when it realizes that, both within and outside its structures, human liberation is not only *consistent with* the Good News of Jesus Christ, but *is* the Good News of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

In an article entitled "How to receive a sacrament and mean it," published in Theology Digest (Autumn 1971), Karl Rahner -- perhaps the greatest Catholic theologian of the century -- described God's gracing and liberating process as a world event. In the article, Rahner proposed a Copernican revolution in Catholic thinking about sacraments. As the sun 'replaced' the earth as the center of the universe, so in recent sacramental theology -- Rahner suggested -- the world replaces the Church as the center of God's liberating and gracious presence. He explained:

[I]nstead of seeing in [the sacraments] a spiritual movement outward *from* the sacramental acting to an effect in the world, we should look for a spiritual movement of the world toward the sacrament.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear, however, that Rahner's sacramental Copernican revolution does not dichotomize Church and world, sacred and secular. For, in the same article -- where he described a scenario that existed before the sacramental revolution -- Rahner argued that it was the sacramental pre-Copernican view that dichotomized Church and world, not the sacramental Copernican switch from Church to world as God's favorite *locus* of grace.

Before the sacramental revolution, Rahner claimed, Christians experienced themselves

as living in a profane world, bound by divine commandments which [were] hard to keep, called by God, and put on a path that [led] through death into God's eternity. In order to get in touch with God, every now and then [Christians stepped] out of this profane world into the 'fane' [the sacred], a holy place, where a true encounter with God [was] possible: Having met God and the Lord Jesus, [Christians returned] to the profane world, to [their] daily grind far from God. The sacrament alone [put Christians] in touch with the Lord, and [made their] life meaningful and "religious."<sup>3</sup>

Rahner thus described the rationale underlying the understanding of sacrament prior to the sacramental revolution; namely, a dichotomy between sacred and secular -- a dichotomy which the post sacramental Copernican revolution revokes. Why? Because -- according to Rahner in the Theology Digest article -- "[God's] sanctifying grace is found everywhere, wherever [people have] not cut [themselves] off from the saving God by a truly culpable 'no'."<sup>4</sup> He further explained: "To be sure the sacraments are grace-events, but not in the sense of discrete discharges of grace into a profane world. The world is permanently graced at its roots, the inmost center of the conscious subject. It is borne up by God's promised grace."<sup>5</sup>

So, if the entire world -- as created by God -- is permeated by divine grace [except where people have cut themselves off by sin from the saving God], then there is no place for the Church to be except *in* the world, not apart from it. In other words, even the Church should be where God's grace is revealed, and there only it should be.

And to be there -- in the graced world -- means for the Church:

- (1) that it must *realize* and *witness to* God's liberating grace, in the world from within its own ecclesiastical structures and accordingly that it must proclaim this worldly grace by living deeds rather than by dead words;
- (2) that it can *celebrate* God's liberating grace in the world only from within its own structures, and only where and when (within its structures) it discovers God's liberating grace. Consequently, the Church must refrain from appealing to its legalistic dictum of *ex opere operato* (which means that God's grace is effectuated through the sacraments just by *doing* the sacramental rites validly, that is, according to Church laws).
- (3) and finally, to be within the graced world, means for the Church that, outside its structures, it must condemn only those sins of which it, itself, is not guilty. Only then is the Church credibly and honestly performing its prophetic role.

Indeed, the Church must constantly be reminded that it lives within a world already "permanently graced" and that it does so only where and when it, too [the Church], is not "cut off from the saving God by a truly culpable 'no'"; that is, where and when the Church is not living in sin, whether in the sins of triumphalism, patriarchalism, androcentrism and clericalism or in the sins of sexism, racism, 'homophobia' and, worst of all, in the sin of hypocrisy: the sin that authorizes the Church to point its

ecclesiastical finger condemingly at sins prevailing outside its structures while within its own structures those same sins are flagrantly rampant.

About the Church's sinfulness, in I Believe in the Holy Spirit, Volume III, Yves Congar, the most eminent Catholic ecclesialogist of this century, warned the Church:

The Church can be sure that God works in it, but because it is God and not the Church that is the principle of this holy activity [the work of Christ], the Church has to pray earnestly for [God's] intervention as grace . . . . [T]he Church does not in itself have any assurance that it is doing the work that will 'well up to eternal life'; it has to pray for the grace of the one who is uncreated Grace, that is, the absolute Gift, the Breath of the Father and the Word . . . . '[I] believe the holy Church' is conditioned by the absolute 'I believe in the Holy Spirit.'<sup>6</sup>

In a chapter published in the early sixties which is entitled "Le diaconat dans la théologie des ministères" (Volume 59 of Le Diacre in the collection Unam Sanctam), Congar expressed in his own way a sacramental Copernican revolution. There, he described worship as our daily life of service as well as liturgy while at the same time ascribing priority to one's daily ethical life over liturgy. He wrote:

Our entire moral life, that is, all of human life, may and must become worship, inasmuch as life expresses faith, hope and charity through which we fundamentally orient ourselves toward God. Only then are the forms of exterior and social worship (sacramental worship) to be considered. However, there is no break between the exterior social forms of worship and the reality of personal Christian life: anthropology is isolated from neither theology or doxological acts.<sup>7</sup>

The theological considerations discussed in this presentation inherit their right to truth from an empirical look at how the God of liberation works. From time to time and at varied places, movements of authentic human liberation unquestionably have sprouted from within the graced

world while, not at all times and places, have such movements blossomed within the Church. For example, as workers for secular corporations organize into unions and strive for their rights, workers for the Church are still deprived of basic rights. In recent years, there have been instances of workers in Catholic cemeteries and hospitals, whose right to unionize has been blocked by Church officials. Similarly, while women in the world have progressed toward attaining professions which, in the past, only males could aspire to, in the Church, women still remain marginal to and -- even in the name of God, Jesus Christ, the Bible, and tradition -- often banished from official ecclesiastical careers and professions as well as absolutely excluded from official ecclesial ministries.

Then, there are those cases where it appears that the graced-world taught the Church something. For example, there is the case of the United States Catholic Bishops who, after many years of upholding equality for all people 'in the world,' finally acknowledged in a draft of their now lingering and possibly defunct Women Pastoral that the sin of sexism does exist in the Church. Similarly, racism in the United States has been deplored in the world by Church officials. But only in recent times have minority males been incorporated -- in tokenistic fashion still -- within the episcopal all-male college.

As far back as the 1930's, Congar felt it to be his prophetic role to call the Church to task. In Chrétien désunis (Divided Christendom), he wrote that, as gift, *de Trinitate*, from the Holy Trinity (or *from above downwards*), in the Church, all is clear and luminous, but, as task, *ex*

*hominibus*, from humankind (or *from below upwards*), without difficulty, one perceives in the Church all the weaknesses, all the shadows arising from its human status, all the inadequacies, all the delays in adapting to its earthly task.<sup>8</sup>

In Congar's Sainte Église, there is a description of the 1932 Church, which quite accurately describes today's institutional Church; namely, a power-hungry Church that favors juridical processes, defends a powerful administrative concentration, and affirms more and more an extensive and detailed pontifical monarchy.<sup>9</sup> Prophetic was Congar's 1937 caution in Chrétiens désunis. [Within the Church], Congar wrote, "the difference [between 'spirit' and 'mission'] creates a big problem. There is no doubt that, in the preaching of the prophets and in that of the Lord . . . there is affirmed the concern that 'mission' [read: authority] should not choke the 'spirit'."<sup>10</sup>

Congar's simple and frank profession of faith, expressed with gospel single-heartedness as referred to above -- "I believe the holy Church' is *conditioned* by the *absolute* 'I believe in the Holy Spirit'" -- relativizes the human, ecclesiastical structures, and absolutizes the divine; namely, the Holy Spirit whose gift is poured over all flesh, all creation, the entire cosmos (Act 2, 17), in the midst of which, Catholics -- even perhaps the disillusioned ones -- still hope to find the Roman Church at least staggering toward its own liberation as it learns from God's graced world the meaning of human liberation.

As a conclusion, it might therefore be good theology to allege -- at least for empirical and existential reasons -- that 'liberating the world might liberate the Church.'

[The complete references to the works cited in this presentation are found in four articles of mine; namely (1) "Worship as Life, Priesthood and Sacrifice in Yves Congar," published in Eglise et Théologie, 21 (1990), pp. 79-100; (2) "Mystery and Expressions: Myth, Theology and Pluralism: Functions of Affectivity and Approximations of Mystery," published in The 1989 Proceedings of the Institute of Critical Thinking (Montclair State College), pp. 395-400; (3) "Heeding the Early Congar and Two Recent Roman Catholic Issues [Seeking Hope on the Road Back]," to be published later this year in the Journal of Ecumenical Studies; and (4) "The Eucharist as Sacrifice: Ethics that Enlightens Doctrine and Cult (An Ecumenical Praxis)," a co-authored article with Ms. Kathleen Coviello, also to be published later this year in Currents in Theology and Mission.]

#### ENDNOTES

1. James H. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation (Philadelphia: Lippincotte, 1970), p. 17 (unpaginated).
2. Karl Rahner, "How to receive a sacrament and mean it," Theology Digest 19:3 (Autumn 1971) 227-234, see 227 = "Überlegungen zum personalen Vollzug des sakramentalen Geschehens," Geist und Leben 43:4 (August 1970) 282-301. (Italics in text are mine.)
3. Rahner, "How to receive," p. 227.
4. Rahner, "How to receive," p. 228.
5. Rahner, "How to receive a sacrament," pp. 228-229.



6. Congar, I Believe in the Holy Spirit III (New York: The Seabury Press, 1983), p. 271.
7. P. Winninger and Y. Congar, Le diacre (Unam Sanctam 59, Paris: Cerf, 1966), "Le diaconat dans la théologie des ministères," by Y. Congar, p. 140. Contextually, 'anthropology' refers to worship as life ("la vie vécue à partir de la foi et dans l'Amour qui donne"); 'theology,' to the source of Christian worship, God (through Christ in the Spirit); and 'doxology,' to worship as response to God, which includes both worship as life and as liturgy. (Id.) See also Richard J. Beauchesne, "Worship as Life, Priesthood and Sacrifice in Yves Congar," Église et Théologie, 21 (1990), pp. 79-100.

Similarly, in the seventies, after an extensive study on the notion of sacrifice in his work entitled The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice, Robert Daly concluded that in the Christian Scriptures worship is described primarily as life rather than as celebration (or liturgy). He wrote that his most significant finding "[was] . . . that . . . the sacrifices which Christians offer [have] primarily an ethical rather than ritual or liturgical meaning. There is a long and controversy-laden history to the idea that Christian sacrifice, or, more generally, true Christian worship, is centered not in acts of ritual and liturgical worship but in the practical ethical sphere of the lived Christian life. The idea as such is not new. What is new, and what establishes the necessary starting-point for all future reflection on the meaning of Christian sacrifice, is our demonstration that the commonly accepted method of modern critical scholarship prove beyond reasonable doubt that this ethical concept of Christian sacrifice is indeed the one that is operative in the New Testament [The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978)]. A more detailed account of Daly's research in The Origins of the Doctrine of Christian Sacrifice is found in Daly's Christian Sacrifice: The Judaeo-Christian Background before Origen (Studies in Christian Antiquity 18, Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press, 1978). In The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice, pp. 82-83. Daly enumerates the crucial passages of the Christian Scriptures, which relate to worship as life: Rom 12, 1-2; Rom 15, 15-16; 1 Pet 2:4-10; Heb 10:19-25; 12:18 -13:16 (pp. 82-83). He then refers to worship as the liturgy of life. He writes: "In each of these passages, either explicitly or implicitly (from the fact that they occur in the context of practical exhortation), sacrifice is understood as the practical living of the life of Christian virtue and Christian mission . . . thus, not cultic or liturgical, but practical and ethical . . . a *liturgy of life*" (p. 83.). Daly states the precise claim of his study; namely, "that true Christian sacrifice is centered primarily -- but not necessarily exclusively -- in the ethical sphere rather than in the ritual or ceremonial sphere of life. There is nothing in this findings which, properly understood, should suggest that liturgical worship is unnecessary or unessential . . . I claim, as demonstrably true, that Christian worship-sacrifice is always and necessarily rooted in ethical or practical self-giving to others . . ." (p. 83, note 29).

On the Protestant side, similarly John Reumann in his book The Supper

of the Lord has pointed out that in the Christian Scriptures one's life of service in the world has priority over Church celebration (or liturgy). Reumann wrote: "To remember leads to shaping one's speech and action . . . in fact to a "way of life" . . . . This strong moral or ethical side to anamnesis, so that memory and commemoration do not deal only with faith [doctrine] and worship [liturgy] but also with life . . . , has often been overlooked. Yet Paul turned the "Christ-anamnesis" of Phil. 2:6-11 to hortatory purposes (2:1-5) and employed the Words of Institution to deal with disciplinary and, more important, socioeconomic, ethical issues at Corinth (11: 17-43)" (The Supper of the Lord: The New Testament, Ecumenical Dialogues, and Faith and Order on the Eucharist [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985]), p. 34. (Here, Reumann refers to an analysis of "remembering" (the *anamnesis*) by Nils Dahl.)

8. Congar, Chrétiens désunis (Paris: Cerf, 1937), p. 110; Divided Christendom (London, Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1939), p. 89.
9. Congar, "En marge de quelques études sur l'Église," La vie intellectuelle (10 avril 1932), p. 19. (In Sainte Église, Unam Sanctam 41 [Paris: Cerf, 1963], p. 450.)
10. Congar, Chrétiens désunis, p. 98n1; Divided Christendom, p. 78n1.