

## VATICAN II AND THE CHURCH OF THE MARGINS

MASSIMO FAGGIOLI

*The article focuses on the idea of the “margins” and “peripheries” of the Church, as recently referenced in the speeches of Pope Francis, and connects this idea with the ecclesiology of Vatican II’s pastoral constitution, Gaudium et spes. A “rediscovery” of this constitution can inject new meaning into the sense of “marginality” of the Church in today’s world. “Marginality” need not be a condition imposed from without, and should not be identified with irrelevance.*

### NOSTALGIA AND THE LEGACY OF VATICAN II

ON OCTOBER 22, 1965, when Vatican II was in its final weeks, Yves Congar received a phone call from the dean of the Faculty of Theology in Fribourg (Switzerland), informing him that the faculty had decided unanimously to give him a doctorate “*honoris causa*.” Congar was not persuaded by the invitation—as he reported in his journal of the council:

I replied that I was very sensible of the honour . . . etc., but that I was opposed in principle to exercises of this kind. I do not see St. Dominic or St. Thomas as doctors *honoris causa*. . . . For me it is the office that counts, not the honour. And if I accepted one offer of this kind, I would be obliged to accept others (for there will be others). Better not to START on this road, WHICH IS NOT MINE.<sup>1</sup>

This passage is indicative of Congar’s pragmatic view not only of his contribution as a theologian but also of the role of Vatican II in the life of the Church. Congar was against clerical triumphalism, because he knew that in the two decades before Vatican II a very high price had been paid to this posture of superiority (a price paid by himself, among other theologians,

MASSIMO FAGGIOLI received his PhD from the University of Turin and is assistant professor at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota. He has recently published, besides a number of books and articles, the following volumes: *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (2012) and *True Reform: Liturgy and Ecclesiology in Sacrosanctum Concilium* (2012). He is now working on a book on the history of church government. The article published in this issue was adapted from his commencement address presented May 10, 2013, at the Aquinas Institute of Theology, St. Louis, Missouri.

<sup>1</sup> Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, trans. Mary John Ronayne and Mary Cecily Boulding, ed. Denis Minns (Collegeville MN, Liturgical, 2012) 821, entry of October 22, 1965, emphasis original.

especially in the aftermath of the encyclical *Humani generis* of 1950).<sup>2</sup> Congar's approach to Vatican II—during the council and in the decades after—was always not of empty celebration but of stewardship of that event and of its meaning for the Church.

Always wary of the nostalgia of the “long 19th century”—as John O'Malley called it<sup>3</sup>—for baroque Catholicism, Congar was also aware of the risks of wistfulness for the period of Vatican II: “The ‘recovery’ [*relance*] of Vatican II asks that we continue to explain its contributions and riches, but such a project also requires that we attend to its directional inspirations. Our efforts cannot be purely commemorative, retrospective, or repetitive. Tradition is as much creation as transmission and reference.”<sup>4</sup> For Congar just as for many other theologians of the council, Vatican II was not a memory to be cherished, but a work to begin; it was not the battering ram for our impatience with church reform, but an example of “reform in the Church”—*réforme dans l'Église*—the kind of reform that lasts, a reform from the inside.<sup>5</sup>

This problem is also our problem today. For some, Vatican II is the epitome of what possibly can go wrong in Catholic theology, while for others the council is the equivalent of the “golden sixties”: an age of unfettered freedom, unleashed creativity, and great expectations—and, according to them, all these expectations betrayed by what happened after the council.

Therefore, for our time, in this “year of faith” (2012–2013) proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI on the 50th anniversary of the council's opening,<sup>6</sup> the question is pressed all the more: Does a church that is “catholic” need Vatican II to be “universal”? Are we perhaps scrutinizing Vatican II because it has diluted the Catholic faith's dogmatic content from the metaphysical to a too-cultural and too-sociological self-understanding? Is Vatican II the source of the “busyness” of the Catholic Church today in its administrative life—committee meetings, reports, dossiers, and pastoral plans?

<sup>2</sup> See Yves Congar, *Journal d'un théologien (1946–1956)*, ed. Étienne Fouilloux (Paris: Cerf, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University, 2008); esp. chap. 2.

<sup>4</sup> See Yves Congar, *Le Concile de Vatican II: Son Église, Peuple de Dieu, et Corps du Christ* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984) 107. Translations throughout are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>5</sup> See Yves Congar, *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Cerf, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, apostolic letter *Porta fidei* for the Indiction of the Year of Faith, October 11, 2011, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_motu\\_proprio\\_20111011\\_porta-fidei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu_proprio_20111011_porta-fidei_en.html).

Blaming the Second Vatican Council is a great temptation indeed. The Church has changed in these last 50 years since the celebration of the council. Things did not always happen in the way we expected. For some, history with its often unpredictable changes is never supposed to happen. But history does happen; so does church history, sometimes in totally unexpected ways—the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI on February 11, 2013, for example. This awareness is part of the legacy of Vatican II for Catholic theology. The inclusion of “historicity” in Catholic theology is one of the most important elements of the new awareness of the council. As Marie-Dominique Chenu wrote in his commentary on the council’s pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et spes*:

The expression “signs of the times” makes sense not just in the literary context of Vatican II, but in the body of Catholic doctrine itself—and its method—where the Church is defined in its consubstantial relationship with the world and with history. This expression is indeed a “constitutional” category, and in this pastoral constitution “*Gaudium et Spes*” it is decisive of the laws and conditions of evangelization.<sup>7</sup>

### VATICAN II THEOLOGY, ECCLESIOLOGY, AND ANTHROPOLOGY

This new theological understanding of history in Catholicism has changed our approach to all the major issues debated at Vatican II, but especially to ecclesiology. The importance of Vatican II for theology and ministry and for the formation of theologians and ministers is therefore closely connected to the council’s major ecclesiological insights.

The first theme that we need to recover from Vatican II is an “ecclesiological emphasis” on the Catholic form of Christianity. The debate on Vatican II in the last 50 years has run through different phases and trends: for example, ecclesiologists heard of the church as “the people of God” before the idea of *communio* became dominant in the 1980s and 1990s. But the retrieval of the idea of the church as a “people of God” remains a fundamental intuition of Vatican II. According to an Italian saying, *il tempo è galantuomo* (time is a gentleman)—that is, time knows how and when to render justice, and this is true also for the history of theology. “People of God” and *communio* will always be part of the church’s self-understanding, despite the theological fashions of this or that decade. Once the dust of the contemporary theological *Zeitgeist* has settled, it is clear that Vatican II was a great moment of “synthesis” of Catholic theology, taking stock of modernity, at least of the modernity of the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries. If we were to describe Vatican II in the language of motion,

<sup>7</sup> Marie-Dominique Chenu, “Les signes des temps: Réflexion théologique,” in *L’Église dans le monde de ce temps: Constitution pastorale “Gaudium et spes,”* ed. Yves Congar and Michel Peuchmaurd (Paris: Cerf, 1967) 205–25, at 225.

we would say that the council initiated a movement *in depth*, taking a closer look at the sources of theology and of Catholic theology, and a movement *ad extra*, outside the church, in a cosmic assumption of responsibility for humankind and the whole of creation, in terms similar to the theological *recentering* of Teilhard de Chardin. I need to use two French words here to describe this movement of Catholic theology at Vatican II. It was a movement of *ressourcement*, that is, of “theological deepening” (on the vertical axis), and a movement of *rapprochement*, that is, of “reconciliation by proximity” (on the horizontal axis).

Vatican II, and especially some of its principal figures, understood that the condition to proceed in this *ressourcement* and *rapprochement* was the idea of the “poor church”: a church shaped by poverty not in the sense of material deprivation, but of deprivation of unnecessary cultural and ideological baggage, which is a real burden for a pilgrim community. This is what Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro meant in his November 4, 1964, intervention on the floor of the council during the debate on schema XIII (the future *Gaudium et Spes*) about the need for the church “to be ‘culturally poor,’” meaning that the glorious traditions, the cultural *organon* of Catholicism, should not limit the universality of the church’s language, should not divide but unite, should not repel people but attract and convince them. In that speech Lercaro said that the most authentic and radical demands of the present time would not be met but avoided, if the council tackled the problem of evangelization of the poor as just one theme added to all the others, and from a sociological perspective. There is a very profound link between the presence of Christ in the poor and the other two profound elements in the mystery of Christ in the church, namely, the Eucharist and the hierarchy; and Lercaro also gave some examples of the practical consequences of his idea for the life of the church: a limitation in the commitment of material means for church organization; a general description of a new style and a new conception of the dignity of ecclesiastical authorities; and a fidelity of religious orders to poverty.<sup>8</sup>

Was this speech received by Vatican II? Only partially, especially from the point of view of the institutional reforms of the Catholic Church after the council. But something changed, also thanks to Vatican II and to that speech. In his first speech to the press, Pope Francis gave the authentic

<sup>8</sup> See Lercaro’s speech in *Acta synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* (Vatican City: Typis polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970–) III/6 249–53; for Lercaro’s December 6, 1962, speech on poverty, see *Acta synodalia* I/4 327–30; and Giuseppe Ruggieri, “Beyond an Ecclesiology of Polemics,” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 2, *The Formation of the Council’s Identity, First Period and Intercession, October 1962–September 1963*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo; ET ed. Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997) 345–47.

exegesis of the name “Francesco,” mentioning explicitly the very conciliar idea of the “poor church, a church for the poor.”<sup>9</sup> Poverty of the church is the Catholic conciliar translation of what Charles Taylor described in his *A Secular Age* as typical of modern mentality, that is, the value of “authenticity.”<sup>10</sup> In the eyes of most Christians, whether Catholic or non-Catholic, an authentic church is a poor church and a church for the poor.

The second theme that needs to be recovered from Vatican II, in order to draw implications for the rediscovery of the council for theological and ministerial formation, is the pastoral concern at the anthropological basis of conciliar theology. *Gaudium et spes*, the most pastoral of all the conciliar documents, addresses the issue of the anguish of modern human beings facing the fundamental questions: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts” (*GS* no. 1).<sup>11</sup>

### **GAUDIUM ET SPES AND THE “DÉPLACEMENT” OF THE CHURCH**

*Gaudium et spes* is one of the most original and characteristic documents of Vatican II—and a unique document from the point of view of its genesis, drafting history, and literary genre.<sup>12</sup> The final vote on the text on December 7, 1965 (2309 *placet* versus 75 *non placet*), gave the church a document that even from its external features represented something new. It is a constitution on the church in the modern world (“*in mundo huius temporis*”), and more precisely on the condition of the human person in the modern world (“*conditio hominis in mundo moderno*”).<sup>13</sup> It is a document on the *habitus* of the church with the modern world, where *habitus* does not mean “relationship” or “connection” but suggests that the church finds its fulfillment in the

<sup>9</sup> This statement, widely reported in the press, was made “off-the-cuff” in an audience for journalists on March 16, 2013, three days after his election.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University, 2007); esp. chap. 11, “The Age of Authenticity.”

<sup>11</sup> Throughout the article I use the official English translation of documents posted on the Vatican website: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html). All URLs cited herein were accessed August 14, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> See Roberto Tucci, “Introduction historique et doctrinale,” in *L’Église dans le monde de ce temps* 33–127; Giovanni Turbanti, *Un concilio per il mondo moderno: La redazione della costituzione pastorale Gaudium et spes del Vaticano II* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000); Hans-Joachim Sander, “Theologischer Kommentar zur Pastoral-konstitution über die Kirche in der Welt von heute,” in *Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, 5 vols., ed. Peter Hünermann and Bernd Jochen Hilberath (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2005) 5:616–703.

<sup>13</sup> *GS* nos. 4–10.

world: there is an “*intima coniunctio*” between the church and the world.<sup>14</sup> The constitution, therefore, after its introduction on “the condition of humanity in today’s world” (nos. 4–10), gives a theological interpretation of “the church and the vocation of humanity” (part 1, nos. 11–45), followed by a long section on “some urgent problems” (part 2, nos. 46–90): marriage and family, modern culture, socioeconomic life, life in the political community, and peace and the community of nations.

Since 1965, much has changed in “modern culture” and in the features of these “urgent problems,” but this is not why the legacy of *Gaudium et spes* in the post-Vatican II Church has been very complex and mixed. The main reason is that *Gaudium et spes* is the real test for the council’s impact on the church’s theological tradition; its text reveals more and more of its prophetic insights as time goes by—as is appropriate for a conciliar document centered around the idea of the “signs of the times,” thanks especially to Chenu and John XXIII.<sup>15</sup> The church’s historicity is not about looking back but about moving forward and *ad extra*. In other words, as a consequence of the pastoral constitution Vatican II is “the introductory moment of a *change of venue* [*Ortswechsel* in German] of Christian faith becoming a world church.”<sup>16</sup>

Contemporary Catholic theology never lost sight of the fundamental role of the pastoral constitution. In his conclusion to the five-volume commentary on Vatican II, Hünemann clearly affirmed the path-opening role of *Gaudium et spes* in the dialogue between the church and the modern world.<sup>17</sup> In a profound book published in France almost ten years ago, Pierre Bordeyne successfully recovered the original driving forces in the drafting of the constitution, emphasizing its key role in the formation of Catholic moral theology in modernity: (1) the *déplacement* in the way Catholic theology approaches moral issues, that is, the decentering of the Church as an institution from moral theology as a consequence of the biblical *ressourcement* of Christian morality; and (2) the drive of *Gaudium*

<sup>14</sup> GS no. 1. On this see Peter Hünemann, “Die theologische Grundlegung der christlichen Sozialethik in *Gaudium et Spes*,” in *Theologie der Sozialethik*, ed. Markus Vogt (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2013) 23–62.

<sup>15</sup> See Chenu, “Les signes des temps,” in *L’Église dans le monde de ce temps* 205–25. For the history of this expression at Vatican II, see Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Notes quotidiennes au Concile: Journal de Vatican II, 1962–1963*, ed. Alberto Melloni (Paris: Cerf, 1995); and Giuseppe Ruggieri, “Appunti per una teologia in papa Roncalli,” in *Papa Giovanni*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1987) 245–71.

<sup>16</sup> Sander, “Theologischer Kommentar zur Pastoralkonstitution” 585.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Hünemann, “Die Gestalt des Textes: Einheit—Strukturen—Grundzüge,” in *Herders theologischer Kommentar* 5:56–75, at 72. See also Peter Hünemann, “Kriterien für die Rezeption des II. Vatikanischen Konzils,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 191 (2011) 126–47.

*et spes* to address the needs of contemporary humanity: the constitution is not about optimism—the original title was “*Gaudium et luctus, spes et angor*” (“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties”)—but about hope as an answer to the “anguish for justice as the initial spark for moral reasoning.”<sup>18</sup> In my view, Bordeyne correctly sees *Gaudium et spes* as the document through which “Vatican II fulfills its responsibility of issuing a moral judgment on modern society.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite the persistent criticisms of neo-Augustinians,<sup>20</sup> *Gaudium et spes* has become an integral part of the message of Vatican II. It is undoubtedly true that *Gaudium et spes* is “linked like no other document of Vatican II to the key perspective of the council, which John XXIII had called ‘pastoral.’”<sup>21</sup> Theobald has recently inserted *Gaudium et spes* into the ecclesiological architecture of Vatican II built around two dimensions, horizontal and vertical. The horizontal dimension of the church (*ad intra* and *ad extra*) must be balanced with the vertical dimension by giving priority to the idea of revelation expressed in the constitution *Dei verbum* (and in the declaration on religious liberty, *Dignitatis humanae*). In Theobald’s dynamic hermeneutics of the conciliar texts, *Gaudium et spes* plays a key role in the horizontal axis. Theobald shows this by crossing the “horizontal” texts (*Lumen gentium*, *Unitatis redintegratio*, *Nostra aetate*, *Gaudium et spes*) with the “vertical” texts (*Dei verbum*, *Dignitatis humanae*, *Lumen gentium*, *Sacrosanctum concilium*) by a profound consideration of their historical natures.<sup>22</sup> This role is an integral part of that “reframing” (in French, *recadrage*) that is a major accomplishment of Vatican II; this in turn resulted in a theology that tries to be more faithful to the gospel than to culture, sociology, or ideology:

The pastoral constitution, therefore, follows an extremely firm structure, founded both on the inductive schema of apostolic pedagogy of Catholic Action and

<sup>18</sup> Philippe Bordeyne, *L’homme et son angoisse: La théologie morale de “Gaudium et spes”* (Paris: Cerf, 2004) 21 (“le texte conciliaire s’est davantage préoccupé de l’angoisse existentielle et de l’angoisse de la justice en tant qu’initiatrices du questionnement moral”).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 342. See also Pierre Bordeyne, “La réappropriation de *Gaudium et spes* en théologie morale: Une redécouverte de la particularité chrétienne,” in *Vatican II et la théologie*, ed. Philippe Bordeyne and Laurent Villemin (Paris: Cerf, 2006) 153–76.

<sup>20</sup> For an example of this approach see Lieven Boeve, “*Gaudium et Spes* and the Crisis of Modernity: The End of the Dialogue with the World?,” in *Vatican II and Its Legacy*, eds. Mathijs Lamberigts—Leo Kenis (Leuven: Leuven University, 2002) 83–94.

<sup>21</sup> See Hans-Joachim Sander, “Theologischer Kommentar zur Pastoralkonstitution” 691.

<sup>22</sup> Theobald, *La réception du concile Vatican II: I. Accéder à la source* (Paris: Cerf, 2009) 771–93.

on a precise perception of modern culture and its internal differentiation and a redefinition of the prophetic role of the Church in this culture. The text leads the reader to a reframing [*recadrage*] of the classical doctrine on the human being, society, and human action in the universe—grounded in a rediscovery of the “biblical economy.” It is on this point that *Gaudium et spes* joins *Dei verbum*.<sup>23</sup>

### REREADING VATICAN II FOR THEOLOGICAL AND MINISTERIAL FORMATION

At 50 years from the last great moment of consultation in the Catholic Church, an interesting paradox has become part of our theological landscape: on the one hand, the immersive historical approach taken by *Gaudium et spes* is more and more important for facing the challenges to moral theology that come from modern culture, modern science, modern economy, modern warfare—in short, the challenges of modernity. On the other hand, research on Vatican II seems to be no longer part of the professional metier of many theologians. The result of this paradox is that even when the intent of *Gaudium et spes* is correctly grasped by theologians and ministers, their lack of commerce with conciliar theology makes their engagement with Vatican II less fruitful than what it could be. And the usual shortcut is an appeal to an ecclesiology of Vatican II—horizontal, ministerial, and ecumenical—that is painfully deprived of its most pastoral document.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, one of the forgotten lessons of Vatican II is the necessity of a synergy between ecclesiology and moral theology, because each discipline contributes to the formation of a *habitus* toward the particular and the universal. It is the particular, concrete, real situations that most challenge us as moral individuals. It is the universal that is typical of the Catholic understanding of the church.<sup>25</sup>

From the point of view of theological and ministerial formation, how might the council and this synergy between different conciliar documents be used in an intertextual approach to them? How might ecclesiology effectively integrate treatments of moral theology, liturgy, and the word of God? Some might think that this intertextual approach is too abstract, too sophisticated,

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 778.

<sup>24</sup> But on this see James F. Keenan, S.J., “Vatican II and Theological Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 74 (2013) 162–90; Lisa Cahill, “Moral Theology after Vatican II,” in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. Michael J. Lacey and Francis Oakley (New York: Oxford University, 2011) 193–224; Darlene Fozard Weaver, “Vatican II and Moral Theology”; and M. Cathleen Kaveny, “The Spirit of Vatican II and Moral Theology: *Evangelium Vitae* as a Case Study,” in *After Vatican II: Trajectories and Hermeneutics*, ed. James L. Heft with John O’Malley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012) 23–42, 43–67.

<sup>25</sup> See Bordeyne, “La réappropriation de *Gaudium et spes* en théologie morale 153–76, esp. 164.

or too out of touch. I would argue, however, that it is exactly the opposite. One of the ever-growing and important elements of Vatican II is the practical implications of *ressourcement* and *rapprochement*—“deepening” and “reaching out,” “reconciliation by proximity.” Vatican II teaches us to look at the global and cosmic *katholon*, but especially to understand the global and the cosmic through the poor, through “the margins.”

Vatican II looks at the whole of the great tradition (in order not to become “traditionalists”), and orients itself by looking at the margins and outside the margins of the Catholic *communio: ad extra*, the poor, the “separated brothers and sisters,” the non-Christian religions, the atheists. The margins, the edges are essential for avoiding the temptation to become slaves of the *Zeitgeist*, of the cultural “menu of the day,” and of the many religious and political establishments that always threaten Christian freedom.

“Margin” comes from the Latin noun *margo* and has many meanings. It means the edge or border of a surface, and the edge of the paper that remains blank; but it also means the edge defining inclusion or exclusion from a set or group; it indicates a permissible difference, the room that allows some freedom to move within limits. More figuratively, “margin” means also a position on the border, in a situation that is no longer (or not yet) the reference or the “normal” one. The Italian *margine* is very close in meaning to the original Latin *margo*; it means also the scar of a wound inflicted on a body (as seen, for example, in the writings of Boccaccio and Manzoni).

If we apply all these meanings of “margin” to the church, we will see that they characterize the church of Vatican II: a church that redefined the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion; a church that is less institution and more movement because its margins are moving; a church that reaches out; a church that sees the margins, the wounds, and tries to heal them with the “medicine of mercy,” as John XXIII said in his address opening the council.

Vatican II happened in Rome, at the historical, geographical, and political center of the Roman Catholic Church. But the council was transacted—between 1959 and 1965, and after 1965—largely by the Church’s margins; in Congar’s words, Vatican II was “a recentering of the *Urbs* [Rome] on the *Orbis* [the world], because the *Orbis* almost took possession of the *Urbs*.”<sup>26</sup> Vatican II is a theological event that took off from a church that 50 years ago was still very much at the center of the public scene; a Catholicism still very popular because inoffensive and in line with the cultural mainstream of the Western world. Times have changed, but Vatican II still indicates the path for a more “marginal” church—marginal in the sense of closer to the margins of our world because closer to the example given by Jesus Christ.

In the Chrism Mass of March 28, 2013, Pope Francis spoke about the ecclesiological relevance of these “edges,” drawing on Psalm 133:2: “It is

<sup>26</sup> Congar, *Le Concile de Vatican II* 54.

like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.” In his Chrism Mass homily of March 23, 2013, Pope Francis gave an ecclesiological meaning of this anointing:

The precious oil which anoints the head of Aaron does more than simply lend fragrance to his person; it overflows down to “the edges.” The Lord will say this clearly: his anointing is meant for the poor, prisoners and the sick, for those who are sorrowing and alone. My dear brothers, the ointment is not intended just to make us fragrant, much less to be kept in a jar, for then it would become rancid . . . and the heart bitter.<sup>27</sup>

This homily by the newly elected pope came just two weeks after the preconclave congregations of the cardinals, where he said that the church should reconsider evangelization in light of the “existential peripheries” and avoid the danger of becoming “a self-referential church.”<sup>28</sup> The notion of “peripheries” in relation to the mission of the church has become one of the key ideas by which to understand the pontificate of Pope Francis. The “change of pace” of this pope has very little to do with the simplistic notion of a “pope of humility”—just as “the good pope” is a simplistic characterization of John XXIII. From the theological point of view, conceptual incorporation of marginality is a step in the slow acceptance of the institution of an ecclesiology that came to maturity in the 20th century. This ecclesiology realizes that the church serves much better when its ministers of the gospel follow the “marginal Jew,”<sup>29</sup> Jesus Christ, who went to the social and religious peripheries, the edges of Second Temple Judaism, rather than follow the Emperor Charlemagne who civilized medieval Europe. The ministerial style inspired by Jesus requires an abandonment of the symbols of power. But from the ecclesiological point of view, the challenge is even greater: the challenge brought by biblical theology to ecclesiology implies a *déplacement*, a recentering of the church from the center to the “suburbs,”<sup>30</sup> to the edges. The church lives in a world in which it is assumed that all of us are now—thanks to the Internet—at the center, online, connected, free, and in control of ourselves. This is not so, and the Catholic Church knows that, perhaps better than anyone else.

Today, sometimes we are led to believe that we live in a world without barriers, without borders, or with borders that we can cross if we have the

<sup>27</sup> See [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130328\\_messa-crismale\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale_en.html).

<sup>28</sup> See Sandro Magister, “Le ultime parole di Bergoglio prima del conclave,” in <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1350484> (March 27, 2013), under the heading “Evangelizzare le periferie” di Jorge Mario Bergoglio.

<sup>29</sup> See John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 2001–2009).

<sup>30</sup> In the United States, “suburb” connotes wealth; in Europe it tends to connote poverty.

financial means. But our borders have changed: we do not have three different kinds of worlds as it was in the 1970s and 1980s, but one world with less visible borders, less visible barriers, but perhaps barriers that are actually higher and more difficult to cross.

It is no accident that inclusion and exclusion have become two key ideas in our ecclesiological debate. Their meaning becomes clear if we go back to the peripheries of our world—social-cultural peripheries—and connect *ressourcement* and *rapprochement* to them.<sup>31</sup> Usually the “marginality” of the church in secular society is taken as a sociological fact, and, sadly, as a symptom of the irrelevance of Christianity today. On the other hand, in these last few decades, the “option for the poor” and for people at the margins of society has provided major new impulses for biblical studies, systematic theology, church history, ecclesial practice, and the academic study of religion. Sometimes the “option for the poor” has been reduced to the need to show mercy for the poor as a minority group. But the idea of the “margins” expressed by Vatican II pushes us much further.

Vatican II offers a view that calls us today to a new sense of unity. “Marginality” need not be a choice imposed from the outside, and should not be identified with irrelevance. Marginality can be an opportunity to rediscover the real boundaries of the church.

<sup>31</sup> See Dennis Doyle, Timothy J. Furry, and Pascal D. Bazzell, eds., *Ecclesiology and Exclusion: Boundaries of Being and Belonging in Postmodern Times* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012).