

# Theology before the Reformation: Renaissance Humanism and Vatican II

Theological Studies  
2019, Vol. 80(2) 256–270  
© Theological Studies, Inc. 2019  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/0040563919836245  
journals.sagepub.com/home/tsj



**John W. O'Malley, SJ**

Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA

## Abstract

Histories of theology move seamlessly from late-medieval Scholasticism to the Reformation and bypass the important theological contribution of Renaissance humanists such as Lorenzo Valla and Erasmus. The article will explain the reasons for this oblivion, provide a sketch of the theological achievements of the humanists, and, most important, show how strikingly that achievement anticipated Vatican II.

## Keywords

dialogue, Erasmus, histories of theology, humanism, Reformation, Renaissance, rhetoric, Scholasticism, Vatican II, Lorenzo Valla

Standard histories of theology move seamlessly from late-medieval Scholasticism to the Reformation.<sup>1</sup> They do so because Luther's theology developed in part as a reaction to Scholasticism. Once the histories have established that fact, they go on to show how, first, in reaction to Luther and the Reformation, Catholic theology

1. See, e.g., Martin Grabmann, *Storia della teologia cattolica: Dalla fine dell'epoca patristica ai tempi nostri*, trans. Giacomo di Fabio. 2nd ed. (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1939); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300–1700)*, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984); and Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999).

## Corresponding author:

John W. O'Malley, SJ, Georgetown University, Box 571135, Washington, DC 20057, USA

Email: jwo9@georgetown.edu

developed a newly controversialist pattern and, second, how, independently of the Reformation, it also developed a renewed interest in the theology of Thomas Aquinas that ushered Scholasticism into a new phase in its development.

These histories invariably devote a few lines or a few paragraphs to Renaissance humanism, especially for its contribution to the historical-critical methods applied to the Bible, as pioneered by Lorenzo Valla (1404–57) and carried forward by others, especially Erasmus (1466–1536). They might even mention Erasmus's famous clash with Luther over free will (1524–25), but that is generally the end of it.

They thus reduce to passing mention an important chapter in the history of Western religious thought. The humanists of the Renaissance did much more than lay the groundwork for textual criticism that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries further developed into a phenomenon with which we are so familiar today. They developed a full theological vision based on sources and methodological principles strikingly similar to the sources and principles that animated the theological vision of Vatican II.

In this article, I want to describe the achievement of Renaissance humanism in that regard and point out ways in which it anticipated traits found in the council. I am not arguing a direct influence on Vatican II but simply pointing out how and why the two phenomena are similar. In the years preceding the council, however, a few theologians had in fact discovered and begun to appreciate the achievement of Erasmus and a few others, and they found in them kindred souls.<sup>2</sup> Only to that degree was the Renaissance directly present at Vatican II.

## Oblivion and Recovery

The first issue to be addressed, however, is why this important phenomenon was so long forgotten in theological circles. I have already suggested the first reason, a focus on Luther and then on northern Europe that excluded virtually everything else. The histories of theology emerged as a distinct discipline in the nineteenth century, and in that century the pacemakers were German Lutherans. For them, Luther was the beginning and centerpiece of their identity. Catholics played essentially a catch-up game, and in that game they knew that Luther and the Reformation were the objects that defined it.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the religious and theological aspect of Renaissance humanism lacked an institutional base that would have given it a presence difficult to ignore. As was true of the Fathers of the Church, the humanists expressed that aspect principally in pastoral works such as sermons and dialogues. They never codified it into a system or a *Summa*. They developed no theological institutes and by the very definition of their enterprise could make no inroads into the theological faculties of the universities, those citadels

---

2. See, e.g., Louis Bouyer, *Erasmus and the Humanist Experiment*, trans. Francis X. Murphy (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1959), and Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'écriture*, 2 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1959–64), *passim* in 2.2.

3. See, e.g., John W. O'Malley, "Catholic Church History: One Hundred Years of the Discipline," *The Catholic Historical Review*, 101 (2015): 1–26, esp. 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cat.2015.0044>.

held firmly by professionals who considered the humanists mere grammarians, uppity amateurs, too big for their britches.

Lutherans dismissed Erasmus from consideration once Luther devastated him, according to them, in his response to Erasmus's treatise on free will. Neither they nor many others paid attention to Erasmus's long and more considered study of the issue, the *Hyperaspistes*, written in response to Luther's attack.<sup>4</sup> On the Catholic side, distrust of Erasmus flared because of his satires on late-medieval practices of piety and on the mendicant orders. The axiom took easy hold, and Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched. When in 1559 the fanatical Pope Paul IV placed his *opera omnia* on the first papal Index of Prohibited Books, he struck a blow from which Erasmus and even other humanists never fully recovered in Catholic circles.

Against the background of the enduring impact of such events, another historiographical tradition emerged in the nineteenth century that made the oblivion even more understandable. In that century historians saw the Renaissance as essentially a rediscovery of pagan antiquity that wittingly or unwittingly sideswiped Christianity. The acknowledged masterpiece propounding this interpretation was *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (*Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*) published in 1860 by the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt, a nineteenth-century Liberal.<sup>5</sup> This learned, subtle, but fundamentally flawed book so effectively established a framework of interpretation of the Renaissance that historians have ever since debated and finally in large measure dismantled.

The sixth and final part of the book, "Morality and Religion," runs to a hundred pages of dense prose, as prejudiced as they are erudite. Whereas, according to Burckhardt, the North produced works like the *Imitation of Christ* that worked deeply on souls for ages to come, "the South produced men who made a mighty but passing impression."<sup>6</sup> He is speaking of popular preachers such as Savonarola and Bernadine of Siena, men largely innocent of the humanist movement. His judgment on humanism itself was absolute and apodictic: "This Humanism was, in fact, pagan."<sup>7</sup>

A reaction to such a sweeping assessment was inevitable. Historians began to argue that alongside the pagan humanists there were some who were Christian. By the third quarter of the twentieth century, however, it had become clear to historians that there were in fact no such thing as pagan humanists. There were humanists not particularly interested in religious and theological questions, but there were none who openly or covertly advocated paganism or the overthrow of Christianity. Between 1969 and 1972, for instance, three books appeared in Italy independently of one another

4. See Erasmus, *Hyperaspistes*, ed. Charles Trinkaus, trans. Peter Macardle and Clarence H. Miller, *Collected Works of Erasmus* 76–77 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1999, 2000), hereafter cited as CWE.

5. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. C. C. Middlemore, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958). See Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Four Centuries of Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), esp. 179–252.

6. Burckhardt, *Civilization*, 450.

7. Burckhardt, *Civilization*, 479.

showing that Valla, once considered the prince of pagan humanists, was in fact a Christian theologian of considerable merit.<sup>8</sup> Today historians agree with the opinion of Paul Oskar Kristeller, the greatest scholar of the Renaissance in the past century, that “the Renaissance was fundamentally a Christian age.”<sup>9</sup>

Kristeller was immensely influential. He originally made that statement in 1954 in a series of lectures at Oberlin College in Ohio, and it helped catalyze a new interest in the religious aspects of humanism. Scholars celebrated the 500th anniversary of Erasmus’s birth in 1466 with several important international conferences, which threw new light on the centrality of religious issues in his writings. The theological vindications of Valla began to appear just a few years later.

By 1970, a renaissance of scholarship on religion in the Renaissance, especially in Italy and North America, was in full swing, symbolized by the publication that year of Charles Trinkaus’s two volumes, *“In Our Image and Likeness”*: *Humanity and Divinity in Italian Renaissance Thought*.<sup>10</sup> This renaissance of the Renaissance climaxed a decade or so later but continued at a reduced pace up to the present.

## What is Renaissance Humanism?

As a period of Western history historians place the Renaissance between 1300 and 1600. Although today some challenge the idea that there was a period of Western history distinctive enough to merit that title, it was during that time-span that the phenomenon known as humanism appeared and flourished, first in Italy and then in other areas of Europe after about 1500. Humanism was essentially a cultural and educational movement that sought wisdom from the literary texts of classical antiquity, which were believed to be more authentic guides for a happy and constructive life than what was currently prevalent, especially in Scholastic philosophy and theology.

As much as the humanists admired both the wisdom and the eloquence of the ancients, they saw that the ancients’ understanding of humanity was incomplete and needed fulfillment with the Christian mysteries of Creation and the Incarnation. Their respect for the ancients was so great, however, that some of them detected in ancient authors traces of divine revelation, somehow mysteriously communicated to them. This was in fact a long-standing tradition in Christianity. The humanists did not invent it, but they pursued it more thoroughly than earlier generations.

- 
8. Mario Fois, *IL pensiero cristiano di Lorenzo Valla nel quadro storico del suo ambiente* (Rome: Università Gregoriana, 1969); Giovanni di Napoli, *Lorenzo Valla: Filosofia e religione nell’Umanesimo italiano* (Rome: Storia e Letteratura, 1971); and Salvatore I. Camporeale, *Lorenzo Valla: Umanesimo e teologia* (Florence: Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento, 1972).
  9. See chapter 4, “Paganism and Christianity,” in Paul Oskar Kristeller’s lucid and magisterial *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), 70–91 at 73.
  10. Charles Trinkaus, *“In Our Image and Likeness”*: *Humanity and Divinity in Italian Renaissance Thought*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970).

The great masterpiece that quite literally embodied this persuasion is found in Michelangelo's frescos in the Sistine Chapel. There, interspersed with his monumental portraits of the prophets such as Isaiah and Jeramiah, are the Sibyls, those mantic priestesses who were believed to have intimations of the Incarnation. At the time, no one criticized the juxtaposition of prophets and Sibyls as inappropriate.

Those seeking wisdom and guidance from the ancients described themselves as pursuing the *studia humanitatis*, "studies about humanity." The sense of the expression is better conveyed by a long paraphrase, "pursuing subjects that tell us what it is to be a full human being and that aid us in attaining that ideal." The *studia* comprised poetry, history, oratory, political and moral philosophy, rather than subjects such as metaphysics, medicine, law, and natural philosophy, the seedbed of modern science. Today the rough equivalent of the *studia humanitatis* are the humanities.

The *studia* did more than contain wisdom. They expressed their wisdom in ways that made their ideals attractive. They inspired people to make the ideal of the virtuous life their own. In other words, they were persuasive as well as wise, and the discipline that taught the art of persuasion was rhetoric. It is no wonder, then, that rhetoric became the defining discipline of humanism.

Rhetoric tends to have a bad connotation today, almost the equivalent of "mere rhetoric," that is, vacuous, inflated, and even misleading speech. In classical antiquity and in the Renaissance, it was, on the contrary, a serious and highly developed discipline, worthy of study and respect.<sup>11</sup> Rhetoric's sometimes partner but often rival was dialectics, another highly developed discipline. Dialectics was the discipline that ruled discourse in the philosophical and theological faculties of the universities, as indicated by their most characteristic exercise, the disputation.

Dialectics is perhaps most simply and helpfully described as the art of winning an argument, and rhetoric best described as the art of winning consensus. The former is intent on proving one party wrong, the latter intent on finding common ground that can unite people in a worthy cause.

The humanist dynamic was thus essentially reconciliatory. As such, it worked for the public weal. Its lessons and goals were therefore appropriate for those engaged in public life, those whose remit was to promote the good of the people in their care—preachers and bishops, therefore, as well as politicians and statesmen. Rhetoric was known as "the civic discipline," the discipline geared to the good of the city, the discipline geared to social issues.

Petrarch (1304–75), the "father of humanism," is best known today for his vernacular poetry, but he is important as well for his work in retrieving classical Latin texts and convincing Europeans that in them they would find a healthy alternative to the

---

11. See, e. g., George Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963) and his *The Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1972); John W. O'Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c 1450–1521* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1979), 36–76; and John M. McManamon, *Funeral Oratory and the Cultural Ideals of Italian Humanism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1989).

Aristotelian philosophy taught in the universities. He put the matter succinctly in his essay *On His Own Ignorance and That of Others*:

It is one thing to know, another to love; one thing to understand, another to will. Aristotle teaches what virtue is, I do not deny that, but his lesson lacks the words that sting and set afire and urge toward love of virtue and hatred of vice . . . The person who looks for that will find it in the Latin writers, especially in Cicero and Seneca.<sup>12</sup>

The passage suggests traits that would characterize the movement. It stresses, for instance, the inspirational character of the sources and an awareness of the limitations of Scholasticism. Implicit in it, moreover, was Petrarch's urgent mandate to his contemporaries, *Ad fontes!* Return to the sources! In them, we will find what we need for the present. Petrarch was concerned almost exclusively with Latin antiquity, but later humanists were just as interested in Greek, Hebrew, and other texts from the ancient world—texts that were wise, inspiring, and consonant with Christianity.

Among those texts, the Fathers of the Church became increasingly important as the movement progressed. Erasmus was certainly a tireless promoter of the Latin and Greek classics, but he was even more engaged in publishing editions of both the Latin and Greek Fathers, a strikingly impressive accomplishment. In 1516, he published his nine-volume edition of the works of Jerome. Then came ten volumes of Augustine, five of Chrysostom, and editions of others such as Hilary, Cyprian, Basil the Great, Irenaeus, and, in Latin translation, Origen.

But for him the Bible was the preeminent text from antiquity. Following in the footsteps of Valla, Erasmus published in 1516 the first critical edition of the Greek New Testament. To justify his Greek text and his Latin translation that accompanied it, he published volumes of annotations on books of the New Testament, among which his *Annotations on Romans* is especially important.<sup>13</sup> The canon of the Renaissance humanists was, therefore, much broader than the Greek and Latin classics.

Petrarch's call to return to the sources led to searching for lost texts. Not only were such texts recovered, but better versions of texts already at hand were also recovered. With the new texts at hand, the humanists set to work correcting corrupted texts and thereby founded the discipline of textual criticism.

Valla, the pivotal figure in that regard, accomplished a triumph for philology when he showed from internal evidence that the *Donation of Constantine*, purported to be a document of the early fourth century, was in fact a medieval forgery. In his *Annotations on the New Testament*, he compared the Latin Vulgate with Greek manuscripts and showed instances where the former failed to convey the meaning of the latter. These were two breakthrough events.

---

12. Petrarch, "On His Own Ignorance and That of Others," in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randal, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948), 47–133 at 103.

13. See Erasmus, *Annotations on Romans*, ed. Robert D. Sider, trans. Sider et al., CWE 56 (1994).

The humanists became therefore keenly aware that the meaning of words change in time and that understanding the historical context of a text was crucial for understanding its meaning as a whole as well as for understanding individual words and expressions within it. They therefore insisted that interpretation had to be based on study of the original Greek and Latin texts. The humanists' method challenged received interpretations even of important biblical passages and was greeted in some quarters with rage and resentment. The bitter controversies between Erasmus and Scholastic theologians resulted largely from Erasmus's uses of the new method.<sup>14</sup>

Erasmus was, moreover, outstanding among the humanists for his many works dealing directly with spiritual and pastoral topics. His *Ecclesiastes* (1535) is the longest, most learned, and most comprehensive study of the theory and practice of preaching published up to that time. It was a landmark work that drove out of existence the medieval works on preaching, the *Artes praedicandi*.<sup>15</sup>

He wrote a beautiful commentary on the Lord's Prayer, and a touching plea, in 1532, for an end to the bitter doctrinal wars set off by Luther, *Prayer to the Lord Jesus for Peace in the Church*.<sup>16</sup> Erasmus wrote a great deal for and about women.<sup>17</sup> Although he was certainly not free of the conventions of his times about women, he consistently took a progressive approach within them.

Deserving of special mention is his treatise, *The Institution of Christian Matrimony* (1526), the longest, most thorough, and most thoughtful study published up to that time.<sup>18</sup> In it, Erasmus shows his confident grasp of the canonical intricacies related to matrimony and his grasp even of the Scholastics' treatment of it. His grasp of the biblical, patristic, and classical texts is of course unparalleled. Even with all its learning, the treatise is obviously pastoral in intent and readily accessible to literate laity, for whom it was, obviously, a subject of the keenest interest.

Italian humanists of the fifteenth century pioneered a new and more positive treatment of the subject than that of the Fathers and the subsequent tradition. They produced hundreds of speeches on the dignity and excellence of marriage, usually delivered on the occasion of a marriage celebration.<sup>19</sup> Erasmus's treatise, though much more considered than such speeches, fits into their positive approach. In it, Erasmus ranges from a subtle theology of the Incarnation, which is the basis for his recurring reflection on the devout sentiments necessary for the spouses if their match is to endure, to the most down-to-earth issues, such as the advantages of breastfeeding by

14. See Erika Rummel, *Biblical Humanism and Scholasticism in the Age of Erasmus* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

15. Erasmus, *Spiritualia et Pastoralia*, ed. Frederick J. McGinniss, CWE 67–68 (2015). See John W. O'Malley, "Erasmus and the History of Sacred Rhetoric, The *Ecclesiastes* of 1535," *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 5 (1985): 1–29.

16. Erasmus, *Spiritualia and Pastoralia*, ed. John W. O'Malley and Louis A. Perraud, CWE 69 (1999), 55–77, 109–16.

17. See *Erasmus on Women*, ed. Erika Rummel (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1996).

18. Erasmus, *Spiritualia and Pastoralia*, CWE 69 (1999), 203–438.

19. See, e.g., Anthony F. D'Elia, *The Renaissance of Marriage in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2004).

the mother. He did not anticipate Vatican II's definition of marriage as a partnership in love (*GS* 48), but he made room for it by insisting on the mutuality and reciprocity of the relationship between husband and wife and on the affection that should characterize it.

## Why the Affinities with Vatican II?

There are a remarkable number of similarities in the situation in which the humanists found themselves and that of theologians at Vatican II. They both called for a return to the sources, a *ressourcement*. They were similar in the sources they had at their disposal and in the privileged role for doctrine and theology they accorded them. Both periods experienced not only a resurgence of interest in Scripture and the Fathers of the Church but, as well, a newly keen critical approach to them. In both periods, the approach ignited bitter controversies over method. The emphasis on Scripture as the primary source of Revelation helped make the debate over *Dei Verbum* so protracted and bitter.

Renaissance enthusiasm for the Fathers reached a climax with Erasmus. For him, the Fathers embodied a method of theological discourse that was inspirational as well as learned, an alternative to the abstract and pastorally irrelevant discourse of the Scholastic theologians. The Fathers had been trained in the rhetorical mode of the Latin and Greek classics, and they provided him with a model of how to do theology.<sup>20</sup> Valla, writing many decades earlier, was of the same opinion.<sup>21</sup>

Correlatively, when in the nineteenth century Jacques-Paul Migne published the 383 volumes of his *Patrologia Latina* and *Patrologia Graeca*, he provided the resources to set off a new and more intense scrutiny of those works that reached a climax on the eve of Vatican II. The Fathers provided an alternative to the booming Neo-Scholastic enterprises that followed upon Leo XIII's encyclical, *Aeterni Patris*, 1879, that prescribed the study of Thomas Aquinas. By the 1940s, some theologians believed the Neo-Scholastic phenomenon had run its course

In his 1946 articles in *Études*, Jean Daniélou called for a "new theology." What the present age required, according to him, was a theology that encompassed the great mysteries of the faith but that, unlike Neo-Scholasticism, expressed those mysteries in a style that provided spiritual nourishment. It needed to be a theology that took account of the modern turn to subjectivity and historicity. This theology would draw its Christian inspiration from three great, interlocking sources: the Bible, the liturgy, and the Fathers of the Church.<sup>22</sup>

20. See, e.g., Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1977); André Godin, *Erasme, lecteur d'Origène* (Geneva: Droz, 1982); and John C. Olin, "Erasmus and the Church Fathers," in his *Six Essays on Erasmus* (New York: Fordham University, 1987).

21. See Eugene F. Rice, Jr., "The Renaissance of Christian Antiquity: Humanist Patristic Scholarship," in *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, ed. Albert Rabil, Jr., 3 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1988), 1:17–28 at 21.

22. Jean Daniélou, "Les orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse," *Études* 79 (April–May, 1946): 5–21.



In 1954, Henri de Lubac published *Méditation sur l'église*, translated into English as *The Splendor of the Church*. The book exemplified the broad approach to theological issues Daniélou had called for. It spoke in a rhetorical and even poetic language reminiscent of the Church Fathers, sharply distinct from the language of Neo-Scholasticism and the juridical language of the councils. The book seemed like a breath of fresh air and had a critical impact on *Lumen Gentium*.

"The Mystery of the Church," the title of the first chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, is the title of the first chapter of de Lubac's book, and it embodied the same approach to the issue. Except for chapter 3 of *Lumen Gentium* on the hierarchical structure of the Church, the rest of the document proceeded in a similar style of discourse. *Lumen Gentium* thus provided a model for the documents of the council that the council then addressed.

A crucial similarity between Renaissance humanism and the council is, therefore, the adoption of rhetorical principles of discourse. In the Renaissance, the humanists did so in a fully deliberate and informed way. The bishops and theologians at Vatican II did so by default. They wanted a language that was "pastoral," an alternative to the abstractions of Scholasticism and to the negativity of anathemas. They thus fell into the *Ars laudandi*, the art of praise and congratulation, panegyric, the epideictic genre codified in classical and Renaissance treatises on rhetoric.

In the Renaissance, the first important and extended application of the genre to public discourse was a series of panegyrics of Saint Jerome in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries by Pierpaolo Vergerio the Elder (1369–1444).<sup>23</sup> In Italy from that point onward, the genre gradually replaced medieval forms of eulogy, as exemplified by the annual panegyrics in honor of Thomas Aquinas in the great Dominican church in Rome, Santa Maria sopra Minerva.<sup>24</sup> The genre had found a home, therefore, in pastoral literature.

For theology, the significant shift came when epideictic began to be applied to doctrines and to the *magnolia Dei*—the great deeds of God such as Creation and especially the Incarnation, a phenomenon for which we have ample documentation in sermons preached in the Sistine Chapel beginning in the third quarter of the fifteenth century.<sup>25</sup> The humanists shifted focus from what God is to what God has done, shifted the focus from metaphysic to history. They focused, therefore, on God's *gesta, facta, opera, and beneficia*—on what God has done for us, *pro nobis*.

As a result of that focus, subjects common in medieval sermons such as indulgences, pilgrimages, miraculous relics, and devils disappear from these sermons. In a

23. See John M. McManamon, *Pierpaolo Vergerio the Elder: The Humanist as Orator* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1996), and his *Pierpaolo Vergerio the Elder and Saint Jerome: An Edition and Translation of Sermones pro Sancto Hieronymo* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1999).

24. See John W. O'Malley, "Some Renaissance Panegyrics of Aquinas," *Renaissance Quarterly* 27 (1974), 174–92, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2860569>; and his "The Feast of Thomas Aquinas in Renaissance Rome: A Neglected Document and Its Import," *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia* 24 (1981):1–27.

25. See O'Malley, *Praise and Blame*.

1485 sermon for Pentecost, a preacher epitomized the ideal of the Christian life that the preachers consistently proposed: “Our cult of God is spiritual, and it consists in thinking honest thoughts, speaking helpful words, doing good deeds, and storing up in heaven a wealth of piety that no accident or ill fortune can snatch away.” Along with faith, hope, and charity, the preachers insisted that the Christian life consisted especially in giving succor to the needy and forgiveness to enemies. These virtues distinguished the Christian from the pagan heroes of antiquity.<sup>26</sup>

The redemptive efficacy of the Incarnation played a huge role in these sermons. The doctrine was standard in the Christian tradition, but the emphasis was special and characteristic. The emphasis is so great that it tends to usurp or at least share the redemptive efficacy usually reserved to Christ’s passion and death. As a preacher said in a sermon for All Saints in 1492, “In the Virgin’s womb and on the cross, he kissed us and restored all reality.”<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to much late-medieval and Counter-Reformation art, the great Christ cycle in the Sistine Chapel, where these sermons were preached, contains not a single panel depicting Christ’s suffering and death. In Cosimo Roselli’s painting of the Last Supper in that cycle, we upon close examination catch through a window in the supper room a glimpse in the distance of the three crosses on Calvary, but that is the only reference in the entire cycle.

Unlike Scholastic sermons that tried to prove various aspects of the great mysteries of the Christian religion, these sermons held up the mysteries for awe, admiration, and emulation. They showed their relevance for living a joyful and godly life. It is no wonder that the dignity of the human person emerged as a consistent and to some extent unifying theme in these discourses.<sup>28</sup> There is no more striking instance of the theme’s dominance than that a sermon preached on Ash Wednesday could be given to that theme—an occasion when one might least expect it.<sup>29</sup>

“The Mystery of the Church,” the first chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, holds up the church in all its splendor for our admiration and appreciation. Chapter 2, “The People of God,” teaches a big truth at the same time that it excites us with the sublimity of our vocation as beloved of God. It is no wonder that the document on religious liberty bears the title, “Human Dignity.” It is no wonder that dignity is the unifying theme of part I of *Gaudium et Spes*.

## Specific Parallels

As we have seen, fundamental to the humanists as well as to the theologians of Vatican II was the primary role of the Bible in theology and in Christian piety. Both traditions

26. See O’Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 165–66.

27. O’Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 141.

28. O’Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 109–12, 135–37, 149–52, 162–63, 173–74, and *passim*.

29. John W. O’Malley, “An Ash Wednesday Sermon on the Dignity of Man for Pope Julius II, 1513,” in *Essays Presented to Myron P. Gilmore*, ed. Sergio Bertelli and Gloria Ramakus (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1978), 193–207.

promoted Bible reading by the faithful, which meant vernacular translations. Even Erasmus, the great advocate of classical learning, urged such translations and such piety. In the "Paraclesis," his introduction to his edition of the New Testament, he called for the translation of it into every language so that all the faithful could read and appropriated it.<sup>30</sup>

He elaborated, "Would that the farmer might sing some portions of them [Gospels and epistles] at the plow, the weaver hum some part of them in the movement of the shuttle, the traveler lighten the weariness of the journey with stories of this kind. Let all the conversations of every Christian be drawn from this source, for our daily conversations reveal what we are."<sup>31</sup>

He saw the devout reading of Scripture as leading to a process of silent growth of the soul into full Christian adulthood, and therefore in the "Paraclesis" he exhorted, "Let us all with our whole heart love this literature, let us embrace it, let us continually occupy our minds with it, let us fondly kiss it, at length let us die in its embrace. Let us be transformed through it."<sup>32</sup>

Erasmus wrote *Paraphrases* on each of the four Gospels and on the major epistles. He intended them to make the texts more understandable to ordinary Christians and to make them pertinent to living a Christian life.<sup>33</sup> In his sublime colloquy, "The Godly Feast" (*Convivium Religiosum*, 1522), he described a fictional gathering of friends for a meal together. Throughout the piece, the conversation returned again and again to scriptural texts, a sample of the kind of conversation he called for in the "Paraclesis." At a certain point, a member of the party questioned whether it was permissible for laymen to discuss such texts. Another member gave Erasmus's reply: "It is permissible even for sailors, in my opinion, provided they are cautious about rendering judgment." Since we are gathered in Christ's name, he said, Christ will help us understand.<sup>34</sup>

Even more important and impressive is how close Erasmus came in the "Paraclesis" to anticipating the teaching in *Dei Verbum* that Revelation is the revelation of a person. That is to say, in the Scriptures, God reveals himself and thus "Christ [himself] is . . . the sum total of revelation" (*DV* 2). In the "Paraclesis," Erasmus sees the Gospels as containing wisdom for living the Christian life, but he goes far beyond that when he says that they bring you "the speaking, healing, dying, rising Christ himself, and thus they render him so fully present that you would see less if you gazed upon him with your very eyes."<sup>35</sup>

The most fundamental parallel between Renaissance humanism and Vatican II is of course the pervasive influence of epideictic rhetoric, the rhetoric of praise, eulogy, and congratulation. The humanists produced a vast literature in praise of certain offices,

30. See Erasmus, "Paraclesis," in *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings*, ed. John C. Olin (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1965), 87.

31. Erasmus, "Paraclesis," 97.

32. Erasmus, "Paraclesis," 105.

33. See, e.g., vols. 43–49 in *CWE*.

34. Erasmus, "The Godly Feast," in *Colloquies*, trans. and ed. Craig R. Thompson, *CWE* 39 (1997), 171–243 at 184.

35. Erasmus, "The Godly Feast," 106.

including the office of bishop. In it, they painted the portrait of the ideal bishop and held up the ideals of the portrait for emulation, much as *Christus Dominus* did for bishops in Vatican II.

To praise others is to extend a hand in friendship. It implies an attempt to understand the other and to do so with benign intent. It finds appropriate expression in conversation, that is, in dialogue, which emerged as a prominent and characteristic literary form in the Renaissance. Dialogue became so closely identified with Vatican II as almost to define it.

In the Renaissance, the dialogue, sometimes called colloquy, was so widespread that “it seems to represent a fundamental and innovative aspect of the intellectual life.”<sup>36</sup> Dialogue entailed a turn to subjectivity as the authors projected two or more voices, each expressing a different viewpoint and different persons that the authors explored within themselves.

The very process of dialogue implied an openness to the other, a mind ready to listen and learn. Dialogue does not end in resolution, as does a disputation. The speakers take their leave of one another better informed and, presumably, more accepting of the others. Erasmus, for instance, ended his colloquy, “The Funeral” (*Funus*), with one of the speakers saying, “Each of these men was my friend. Perhaps I am not a fair judge of which one died in a manner more becoming a Christian.”<sup>37</sup>

The Renaissance produced hundreds of dialogues in both Latin and the vernaculars, and virtually every major author of the period made use of it. Among the best-known works are Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) and Baldesar Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), but they are only the tip of the iceberg. Erasmus wrote over 60, largely as texts for students to provide them with models of good Latin style but at the same time to convey in interesting, sometimes humorous ways important moral or religious truths.

As I mentioned earlier, the intermittently persistent Christian impulse to find some way to save persons unbaptized and ignorant of the gospel resurfaced strongly in the Renaissance, and dialogue was an apt medium in which to explore the beliefs of such people. The humanists of the Renaissance were particularly concerned with the great figures of classical antiquity, and they found in them wisdom and ways of expressing it that inspired them to a more Christian way of life.

In “The Godly Feast,” Erasmus leaves no doubt as to what he believed in that regard. The best-known passage occurs when one of the speakers says, “I think I have never read anything in pagan writers more proper to a true Christian than what Socrates spoke to Crito shortly before drinking the hemlock.” To that another replies, “An

36. Eva Kushner, “Renaissance Dialogue and Subjectivity,” in *Printed Voices: The Renaissance Culture of Dialogue*, ed. Dorothea Heitsch and Jean-François Vallée (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004). See also Virginia Cox, *The Renaissance Dialogue: Literary Dialogue in Its Social and Political Context, Castiglione to Galileo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992), and Roberta Ricci and Susan Wright, eds., *The Renaissance Dialogue* (Buffalo: Northeast Modern Language Association, 2016).

37. Erasmus, “The Funeral,” in *Colloquies*, CWE 40 (1974), 763–95 at 795.

admirable spirit, surely, in one who had not known Christ and the Sacred Scriptures. And so, when I read such things, I can hardly help exclaiming, ‘Saint Socrates, pray for us!’”<sup>38</sup>

In another passage, which is somewhat reminiscent of *Nostra Aetate* (2), Erasmus provided a theological basis for the sanctity of such pagan authors:

Whatever is devout and contributes to an upright life should not be called profane. Of course, Sacred Scripture is the basic authority in everything, yet I sometimes run across ancient sayings or pagan writers—even the poets—so purely and reverently said that I cannot help believing that the authors’ hearts were moved by some divine power. And perhaps the spirit of Christ is more widespread than we understand, and the company of saints includes many not in our calendar.<sup>39</sup>

But during the Renaissance, a benign attitude toward other religions was widespread. No less a figure than Saint Antoninus of Florence (1378–1449) gave explicit approval to the principle that all truth, no matter by whom uttered, was from the Holy Spirit.<sup>40</sup> Few carried further the syncretistic approach to ancient philosophies and religions than Giles of Viterbo (1472–1532), polymath, prior general of the Augustinian order, cardinal, and major cultural figure in Rome in the early years of the sixteenth century.<sup>41</sup>

Giles did not compose any dialogues, but in his quest for religious concord he pursued virtually every ancient source to be found in Mediterranean antiquity, including those we now know to be apocryphal. As he matured, he concentrated more and more on the Kabbalah, convinced it contained a revelation of the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation. To perfect his Hebrew, necessary for deciphering the message, he befriended the great rabbi Elijah Levita. He took Elijah and his family into his household for ten years so that Elijah might teach him Hebrew, as Giles in return taught him Greek. In 1518, moreover, Giles had a Latin translation of the Koran made for himself in Spain.

Jean Bodin (1529/30–1596) wrote the most intriguing inter-religious dialogue of the period, the *Heptaplomeris*, which in its standard English translation is presented as *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime*.<sup>42</sup> Bodin, a Catholic and brilliant thinker in the French Renaissance, wrote important works on legal theory and political philosophy. The *Colloquium* is so different from his other works that a few scholars questioned his authorship. Today, however, the attribution to him is generally acknowledged as correct.

38. Erasmus, “Godly Feast,” 194.

39. Erasmus, “Godly Feast,” 192.

40. See John W. O’Malley, *Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform: A Study in Renaissance Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 20.

41. See O’Malley, *Giles of Viterbo*.

42. See Jean Bodin, *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime*, ed. Marion Leathers Kuntz (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2008).

Written in Latin, the *Colloquium* purported to be a conversation among a Catholic, a Jew, a Lutheran, a Calvinist, a Muslim, a skeptic, and a philosophical naturalist. It was an implicit but powerful call for religious toleration, which was surely the result of living through the destructive French Wars of Religion, 1562–98, between the Catholics and the Huguenots. Living through the horrors of World War II made reconciliation with the Other an imperative for the participants in Vatican II.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to provide a basic introduction to a large and complex subject and to show how and why it in certain ways anticipated Vatican II. The presupposition of some authors that under the literal sense of texts there lurked a primitive revelation of Christian doctrines cannot be taken seriously today. Nonetheless, the basic impulse in them to look with kindly eyes upon others' beliefs continues to make good sense, and we must remember that most of the important authors did not approach their texts with that presupposition.

At least one question needs to be addressed. Can one say that what the Renaissance produced was really a theology, or did it merely provide elements for a religious vision? An adequate answer to that question would take us far beyond the capacities of what an article can attempt and, I fear, beyond my capacities to deal with it. Nonetheless, two authors, Valla and Erasmus, thought deeply about the theological enterprise and cannot be dismissed as dilettantes.<sup>43</sup>

One thing is certainly clear. Renaissance humanism did not produce a theology in the sense of a professionalized academic discipline lodged in a university. Before the invention of universities in the late twelfth century, however, there were the Fathers, which in turn raises the question of whether there was such a thing as patristic theology. If there was, it provides a helpful analogy with the Renaissance. In both instances, the authors wrote out of a basis in the rhetorical culture of Greek and Roman antiquity. It was in that culture that both sets of authors received their education. Augustine, after all, was a teacher of rhetoric.<sup>44</sup> This means that in the writings of the Fathers and in the documents of Vatican II, the pastoral intent is paramount. If therefore they did in fact produce a theology, they produced one that was pastoral and spiritual.<sup>45</sup>

43. See, e.g., Camporeale, *Valla*; Boyle, *Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology*; Georges Chantraine, "Mystère" et "Philosophie du Christ" selon Erasme: *Étude de la lettre à P. Volz et De la "Ratio verae theologiae" (1518)* (Namur: Secrétariat des publications, 1971); and John W. O'Malley, "Introduction," *Spiritualia et Pastoralia*, CWE 66 (1988), ix–li, with the notes, 259–70.

44. See H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (New York: The New American Library, 1956) and his *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1937).

45. See John W. O'Malley, "Reconciling Doctrine, Theology, Spirituality, and Pastoralty: Pope Francis and Vatican II," forthcoming in the *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*.

**Author Biography**

John W. O'Malley, SJ, is University Professor in the Theology Department of Georgetown University. His specialty is the history of the religious culture of modern Europe. The best-known among his dozen monographs is *The First Jesuits* (Harvard University, 1993), now in twelve languages. He has more recently published books on the three most recent ecumenical councils and currently has in press with Harvard University, *When Bishops Meet: An Essay Comparing Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II*.