

# The Meaning of Renewal

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Perhaps the first and most obvious point to make about “renewal” is that there is nothing new about it . . . that it is the true name of the process called nature and society, the stuff of life itself.

In spite of the universal presence of renewal in nature and history, there is considerable restlessness about the significance of the term in relation to things religious, things “not of this world,” things eternal and unchanging. Especially is this true since the events of the second Vatican Council, whose keynote was *aggiornamento* and whose recurrent motif was “reform and renewal.” Because this grounding, this “newness,” is so basic to the work of that Council, an understanding of its full import is crucial to any effort to grasp what the Council really said, to whom it was speaking, and for what.

Thousands of articles have been written, of course, which are addressed to these three last questions—what was said in the Council, to whom, and why. Most of these take off on one or another “post-conciliar” tangent and return to confirm the intent of the bishops and to urge patient cooperation, trust and faith. Many of these pieces are

very valuable; but altogether *too* many of them presume a comprehension and acceptance of "renewal" which is not necessarily present in every reader . . . and which is not usually the same in any two readers. For this reason . . . we wish to discuss renewal itself: what it is, what it isn't, and why it should be made an essential concern of the universal Church in the 20th Century.

### **Renewal in Nature**

There is today a widespread—if not a unanimous—acceptance of "process" as the most suitable and workable conception of nature-in-action. Older world-views were founded on the more immediate manifestation of nature as a cycle, or series of cycles. The days and years, full circles; the roll of seasons; the "life-cycle" of living things; the unrelenting fuel-to-waste phases of even mechanical things; the inexorable wearing down of all natural and man-made objects to the elemental ingredients of which they were first made . . . the overwhelming evidence that all creation was a cyclic, reciprocating engine destroying itself by spending its energies, restoring itself only by reproduction or repair.

A new approach to the human mission of finding purpose in the natural cycles was furnished by the emergence of science. The pursuit of systematic and detailed knowledge, particularly in the areas of biology and anthropology, began to reveal that each new generation of human beings did more than start over. There was growth from generation to generation, and there was development of new potentials for dealing with the "unchanging" landscape of natural repetition. In other words, a pattern of direction, of ascent, of wider organization began to appear from the study of the human species *by* the human species. As a species, mankind learned how to *build* a process, how to make a natural spiral a "rising spiral."

Whether you call this phenomenon a "quantum jump" or a "crossing the threshold of consciousness," it is clear and getting clearer that the presence of humanity in the family of nature has introduced a thrust upward as well as around. Each succeeding renewal of generations represents a new foothold, which was formerly just a handhold; and it is simply not true that "the more things change, the more they are the same."

Revolutionary discoveries in the laboratory and in outer space are becoming almost commonplace, with the result that a single lifetime

spanning only the years since 1900 has encompassed more “quantum-jump” explosions of energy and knowledge than the hundred generations preceding. Times have changed, and time itself has changed for most of us. Time no longer consists of a clock or meter *running down*, but of a process begun—set in motion. Lives are lived on launching pads today. The new generation no longer signals the demise of the old, but rather its fulfillment and justification. The human adventure is “process,” and the excitement in technologic societies is in the incredible momentum the process has lately exhibited. All the talk today is “breakthrough” and “historical first”—a man on the moon by 1969; breaking the genetic code behind all living beings; the knowledge-explosion; cybernetic revolution; the computerized society; consciousness-expanding drugs; probing inner space . . . abolish poverty; abolish death; abolish God. This is renewal become religion; renewal renewed; “vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself and falls on the other,” to the grandstand chant of “all systems are go.”

### ***Renewal in Society***

Obviously, the key to human progress—the giving of direction to successive generations of life-cycles—lies in formation of the new generation by the parent generation, the transmission of memory by a record of advancement. Sexual reproduction permitted the chance modifications of new generations by which many species were enabled to survive, and even to master the conditions to which they were born. But only with man—a species never over-specialized to the demands of one kind or place of living—did this intelligence emerge by which different *kinds* of rigors could be mastered, and a base for progressive building established wherever life could be supported. By the gifts of memory and language, man eventually was able to *bequeath* achievement to the next generation, enabling it to *begin* more advanced and to advance further. The “natural” cycle was thus broken out of the plane of circular time and set in a cylindrical arc of ascent.

Every generation was still a “starting over” in that every member of the new generation began as all past members had, unknowing and untried. But it was not a slipping back, a deadbeat repetition. The experience and understanding acquired in the past could not be conveyed to the future by natural endowment; but they could be recorded and imparted by education. In other words, mankind discovered that knowledge could be transmitted and judgment tested without repeat-

ing the experience from which these derived. (Perhaps man has not yet applied this discovery to the prevention of man-made disaster; it would seem that every generation must go to war before agreeing to condemn it as the greatest evil.)

The point of the foregoing discussion is simply that renewal is the means by which nature continues and man is the means by which nature advances.

### **Learning To Do Without**

One of man's greatest discoveries about himself (as noted above) was the discovery that knowledge acquired by experience could be preserved and passed on without the need to repeat the experience. Man learned to do without—to dispense with—the need to undergo an event in order to understand it. He learned, for example, that a hand-ax of stone is more effective than the hand alone for cutting and hacking. The next generation did not have to repeat the experiment. He learned that crops could be planned and planted in one place—he could do it without foraging; cattle could be domesticated and bred—he could do without hunting; metal could be smelted and shaped—he could do without stone; shelter could be constructed—he could do without caves.

On a higher level, man learned that he could dispense with total dependence on oral traditions—he could record his achievement and communicate it to other man and other organizations on stone and then on paper. The cycle of renewal began to rise; the undertow of dependence on “nature” began to abate. Each generation had the renewed challenge of learning, but the conditions by which to learn were improving—sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly. As man learned to tame his environment and free himself from preoccupation with survival, his aptitude for learning began to branch out into the unexplored. As his problems became less immediate and perilous, he began to wonder *why* as well as how . . . and a new plateau was reached.

Probably the clearest expression of “renewal-advance” can be found in the changing relation of parents, teachers, etc., toward persons in their charge. The function of those holding authority is to enable those in their charge eventually to do without authority . . . to grow into the independence, or interdependence, which makes cooperative

love a possibility and a goal. In this sense, all learning is a learning-to-do-without. It should be the point of all teaching.

Historically, the fact is that man, by changing his environment and recording his knowledge, could change the natural history of his posterity. Men did not change, but *Man* did; he could, and did, release the *wonder* of his offspring from the labor of simple survival and freed it to roam the cosmos, or to turn back upon itself. It was the same wonder in all generations—the ability unique to man by which he could know that he did not know, but that he could *find out* again as he found out before. The search was on, the search that must end in God. It began over half a million years ago when the first man struggled to his feet like a wide-eyed child to peer at the table of earth around him. His grandchild has just now hoisted himself high enough to peer across the table of outer space. The family trait is unmistakable; it is wonder, ever-renewed.

### **Renewal and Man**

Human history has been neither a steady progression—like a rocket rising from its pad—nor a cycle, a wheel spinning in its fixed place. Mankind's ride shows both characteristics. It has been a gradual ascent, and one stabilized by the natural cycles of regeneration . . . the gyro-compass guiding the ascent by constantly renewing its orientation.

There are numerous examples—in both nature and history—of processes that did not incorporate renewal. The destiny of those processes was extinction. Examples would include the countless animal species that died out because of over-specialized adaptation to a set of conditions which were not permanent. The parallel fate of so many human institutions, inflexibly committed to an age which had to pass, is obvious. All efforts by nature and by man to fix the terms of progress too far in advance and to equip a species or an organization for one kind of function, once for all, have resulted in extinction. "Advance" without renewal is decay. On the other hand, the failure or the inability to provide for *some* kind of progressive advance—constant renewal without consolidation—has resulted in another kind of extinction: the cycle that only repeats itself and never develops. The whole animal and insect world is capable of regenerating itself, but its orbit is fixed. Each generation re-enacts the history of its predecessors; none is able to lift its successor.

The exception is man, who has been able to *build* on the cycles of his generations. Man is neither a wheel spinning in place and going nowhere nor a projectile forever committed to its first trajectory. Man can regenerate, and inform the new generation. Man can move, and pilot the motion. His difficulties come when he fails to incorporate *both* renewal and direction into his activities, whether personal or organizational. The deep-rooted human desire for permanence has frequently caused him to fail for lack of renewal—the calculated “starting over.” Setting out on a fixed bearing, individuals—like nations—have found themselves mired in the merciless cross-currents of unanticipated change. They have not been able to react to the change, to adapt to it and control it. The struggle for control can never be a once-for-all proposition; it is never-ending. Where formerly the antagonist in the struggle was blind natural force, today it is a hydra-headed historical force. Where formerly individuals succumbed to hostile natural conditions, today whole nations and institutions go under with the tide of social change—like rafts, taking everyone aboard with them.

The rise and fall of the human being recapitulates the history of his institutes. When he fails to inter-connect the phases of his life, a man loses continuity and direction. He starts over without progressing, and his efforts to deal with changing life situations retain their first infantile character, uncoordinated and needing assistance. Conversely, a man may try to program his life to a preconceived pattern or direction. (The notion that all things will come in a season, that life is a constant graduation to the next plateau, is equally futile.) Such a person loses the resilience of his youth and begins to see things with eyes encased in blinkers.

Both kinds of lives can be “successful” in that they may result in individual achievement during an individual lifetime. But both kinds of lives contribute little or nothing to the direction or renewal of the succeeding generation. It is then that societies and institutions falter . . . that new generations become alienated and founder in some infantile “new start” full of “happenings,” or spin off on some desperate tangent.

Neither the new start nor the offshoot direction can survive the floodtide of converging forces of change—scientific, political and moral. When the tide takes control of the craft, chaos rules again . . . as surely as before the birth of time. The terrible difference at this

point in history is that the forces that threaten are of man's own making, and the craft that is threatened carries all his hopes to be more than a portion of biologic history.

### **Renewal and the Church**

Christianity, with its roots in Judaism, is that unique institution in human history which professes to be the offspring of eternity and time . . . of purpose and process . . . of destiny and cycle. That the stress of the institutional Church has been upon eternity, purpose and destiny, does not mean that Christianity is *divorced* from time, process and cycle. This is, perhaps, where the first misunderstanding of renewal in the Church begins. Little that the Church has or does as a human organization is fixed or permanent. Not the rites, not the words, not the thoughts or the deeds, the canons or the councils—none of these is relieved from the need for renewal and advance. If any were, they could belong only to the eternal God and not the God-made-man or to his human brothers.

So what, if anything, is different about this human association called the Church? If it is not exempted from the demands of adaptation and renewal and relevance, what are its claims to divine mission and eternal verity? This is what is troubling to so many Catholics today, living in and with the wake of the 2nd Vatican Council, the council of renewal. How can the Church embrace a reformation of its structures and its goals—the instruments of *human* progress—without repudiating its divine origins and guidance? The answer is that, like its Founder, the Church is human and divine. All of its actions and events, like the acts and the events of Jesus' life, are temporal and three-dimensional, and directed to human beings and enacted on behalf of human beings.

There should be no more difficulty accepting the need for renewal in the Church than in accepting the need for the Lord to wash his feet after a long journey on the roads of Palestine. But then, perhaps not all Christians can really accept that last fact after all.

It is possible that for many or even most of those who call Jesus Savior, it is not Jesus their brother . . . born, living and dying . . . whom they invoke. It is only Jesus the wonder-worker, only Jesus resurrected and ascended whom they seek. To leap out of the prison of cycle and the fear of advance into the never-never land of honey-comforted "salvation" is the perpetual human temptation. At its worst, it expresses itself in rigid ritual . . . the totally predictable re-enacted

again and again in defiance of time and change and process. Such is the liturgy of those who "measure out their lives in coffee spoons." It is for these that the Church renews itself. It is for us that the Church strives to purge itself of the accretions of the ages, the all-too-human efforts to make the Church wholly divine, something other than who it is.

Every Catholic must be aware that the Church has always been bound up with human history, its cycles and salients, its successes and failures. There is no scandal in this; it is precisely mankind for whom the Church exists. The Church's history is a human history; that is not its shame, that is its mission. It could not be otherwise and be the Church of Christ. The "relevance" of the Church—so much under discussion in post-conciliar forums—is still the relevance of Christ to man—call him Christian, or anything else. The relevance of the message that makes all true things true, all living things alive, all dying things reborn. What could be more "relevant" than that; what relates more directly to this man who is living and who is dying?

One special mode of renewal and its specific results is the 2nd Vatican Council and the documents issuing from it. A council of the universal Church is, of course, a very special mode of renewal—not the only kind in the Church, by any means, and a kind which does not, of itself, bring about the renewal it seeks. The Council could not but point the way to renewal, by uncovering the obstacles to it and directing the regenerative energies of Christians to the proper areas to be renewed. Though the Council was summoned by one man, it was made possible and necessary by the confluence of numberless forces and needs in the Church. These forces and needs remain. What the Council has done is to fuse and crystallize them into distinct issues, relate them to the nature and mission of the Church, and indicate the means for dealing with them.

The 2nd Vatican Council was, of course, only the latest in a long series of such conferences held throughout Church history. Each of these sought renewal of some sort—in anticipation of or in reaction to secular crises, in response to internal crisis. There should be nothing surprising in the need for the Church to re-examine its premises or reformulate its policies. For one thing, the Church needs renewal because the Church is human, as well as divine. More importantly, the Church of Christ needs renewal because the faith of Christians is faith in renewal and re-birth, constant re-birth, at every stage of life, includ-



ing death. The "spirit of the Gospel" is nothing other than the "spirit of renewal."

In one respect, perhaps, the 2nd Vatican Council stands unique among the twenty-one universal Church conclaves. Unlike earlier councils, the "council of renewal" was convened in response to an internal sense that the time was ripe . . . that elements in the Church searching for renewal needed coordination . . . that the world was turning its back on the past and on all the institutional equipage wed to the past. *Aggiornamento* was Pope John's one-word chamade, summoning the world-wide leadership of the Church. His word itself signifies the uniqueness of this Council. It was not to be another call for renewal of this or that aspect of Christian life; it was a call for an understanding of renewal itself as the Church's true and only way of life.

### **Renewal Is Not Return**

The effect of renewal, in persons and in organizations, is readiness. It is also the sign and seal of maturity. Having learned to do without—without fixed questions and sure answers; without appeals to parental protection and direction; without the need to feel secure in the face of the unknown—the renewed man is the mature man. And the best thing he can bequeath his son is not his experience or advice, but his maturity. Socrates said: "He who needs least is most like the gods."

If the human race could produce, for just one generation, a people unafraid to learn, ready for the unknown, secure only in the truth, then all false gods would fall down. Unhappily, we don't usually succeed in conveying a readiness for life and death from generation to generation. Instead, we impress posterity with our most infantile fears, by trying to hide them; we start over vicariously with the new generation, making their dependence the source of our "maturity" . . . endowing them with our needs, stunting them in their growth toward freedom. What else can explain the tragic rehearsal of the same kinds of self-defeat, repeated again and again throughout history? Where is that self-defeat more tragic than among those who claim the legacy of Jesus Christ, who gave the whole truth to man, to make him wholly free?

Renewal cannot be a return. In a person, the habitual readiness for the new, the needed change . . . the readiness to let go of another comforting anchorage in order to know more truth . . . that is not a return,

but a maturing. For the Church of Christ, renewal means nothing other than letting go of the accumulated comfort of unquestioning certitude—programmed salvation, by the fixed compass. The same painful surrender was demanded by Jesus of his first disciples. They had to let go of everything that made them safe: safety from society by conformity, safety from civic reprisal and divine wrath by the punctilious observance of the law, safety from the truth about life and death by the distracting pursuit of goods and pleasures. They had to let go, to do without the comfort of the book full of answers and the reassurance of tradition. They had to face the contradictions of their faith in the man who preached re-birth—lose yourself to find yourself—this very unsafe Savior and his dangerous salvation.

Is the renewed community of Christians to return to the infant Church? It cannot be. The infant Church was much like an infant, head and hand working against each other, frail, helpless, terrified by the new and unsafe world of sights and sounds, a stranger wondering and hoping, living for a mission and a promise. After twenty centuries, the Church should be a community grown tall and strong, secure in the world, diligent in its mission, confident of its promise.

But is it grown up? Has it truly “come of age”? Or is it—are we—still frightened by the import of its faith; is it still straining on the brink of re-birth, the leap for the truth without fear? Are Christians of such little faith in one another, and in the person whose name they dare ascribe themselves, that they cannot face the demands and the doubts of the world? The answer might seem to be “yes.” We cannot let go the surety, the sweet strength of structure, two thousand years in the making. If the world asks “Who are you? What do you have to say for yourself?” can we point to the cathedral and answer, “Have you ever seen anything so magnificent?” This is not the legacy of Jesus, it is the infantile inheritance of the Church of Constantine, the Church that found favor with the emperor.

What of the other, the true tradition of the pilgrim Church constantly seeking self-renewal, struggling for more truth and more freedom? Where has it been and who have been its members? The answer to that has to be “everywhere,” everywhere the Holy Spirit who is truth and freedom can breathe. Its members have been at all places and stations of the “official Church,” some of them in the court, more of them in the streets; some of them have been named saints, and some perhaps have been named heretics. The paradox of it is that we

of this generation have inherited two "traditions" intact. The wonder of it is that the Council of Renewal, 1962-1965, has officially invoked the tradition of renewal—the pilgrim community of sinners and searchers—as the authentic Christian vitality and spirit. And it has called upon all Christians to identify themselves with the spirit of renewal and join in the task of reaching and teaching Christian maturity. The call is one which most Catholics and Christians should have little trouble heeding, since it affirms what they have long cherished above all the grandeur and above all the laws, the imperishable life and message of Jesus Christ: love is truth, death is re-birth.

If these principles have become encrusted and lusterless in the eyes of the world, it is up to us to prove their worth in service to that world. The *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* put it this way: "We can justly consider that the future of Humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping."

NOTE: This essay is the introduction to *The Spirit of Renewal* published by the National Council of Catholic Men, Washington, D. C. (1967)

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