

A. M. D. G.

MAIORUM TRADITIO:
Patristic Remedies for Modernist Woes

Introduction

On September 8th, 1907, in the fifth year of his pontificate, Pope Pius X promulgated his Encyclical Letter *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* condemning Modernist doctrine. Scholars—especially those who do not hold the encyclical in particularly high regard—are quick to point out that the Modernist system elaborated in the encyclical exists in its totality nowhere else other than in the encyclical itself. Pope Pius willingly acknowledges their criticism, observing that the Modernists “present their doctrine without order and systematic arrangement, in a scattered and disjointed manner.”¹ The Pontiff cautions, however, that the Modernists themselves are hardly scattered-brained. They are rather “quite fixed and steadfast” in their Modernist convictions. Pius groups their teachings together in order “to point out their interconnection, and thus to pass to an examination of the sources of the errors, and to prescribe remedies for averting the evil results.”² He explains further “that the three chief difficulties which stand in the [the Modernists’] way are the scholastic method of philosophy, the authority and tradition of the Fathers, and the magisterium of the Church, and on these they wage unrelenting war.”³ Our particular interest lies in the second of these three antidotes for the Modernist heresy. In our consideration of patristic remedies for Modernist woes, we shall not, however, limit ourselves solely to Pius X’s *Pascendi*. Rather we shall take a broader view of the question beginning with an examination of five earlier papal encyclicals: Pope Pius IX’s first Encyclical Letter *Qui Pluribus* promulgated on November 9, 1846, his later encyclical *Quanta Cura* promulgated on December 8, 1864, Leo XIII’s first Encyclical Letter *Inscrutabili Dei Concilio* promulgated on April 21, 1878, his third encyclical *Aeterni Patris* promulgated on August 4, 1879, and his encyclical on biblical studies *Providentissimus Deus* promulgated on June 18, 1893. Fierce cultural wars waged in the wake of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars rattled the six decades that these encyclicals delineate. By no means were those cultural wars merely a matter of intellectual debate. Humanity reaped their bitter, existential fruit during the two World Wars that engulfed the globe in the first half of the

¹ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §4.

² Pius X, *Pascendi* §4.

³ Pius X, *Pascendi* §42.

twentieth century. In retrospect, Pope Pius X's 1907 condemnation of Modernism both looked back to the dangerous currents that flowed mightily throughout the nineteenth century, and anticipated at the beginning of the twentieth century their tragic consequences for a society that had factored God out of the civic equation. As we shall see, getting philosophy and theology right with the help of the Church Fathers offers a crucial remedy even now for the Modernist woes that perennially plague us.

Pope Pius IX's Qui Pluribus and Quanta Cura

On June 16, 1846, the Cardinals, who had gathered in conclave in the chapel of the Quirinal Palace, elected the fifty-four-year-old Giovanni Maria Cardinal Mastai-Ferretti to succeed the recently deceased Pope Gregory XVI. Mastai-Ferretti took the papal name Pius IX. Soon after his election, he issued a general amnesty for political prisoners in the Papal States—an act of his temporal sovereignty that immediately endeared him to progressives throughout Europe and the world. Enthusiastically did they hail the new pope's liberality to the great consternation of the Austrian Imperial Chancellor Klemens von Metternich who in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna had orchestrated post-Napoleonic Europe's reconstruction according to conservative monarchical lines. 'The crowds' incessant hosannas acclaiming the "liberal" pope unfortunately deafened them to the Pontiff's own voice. For, even though the amnesty that he had granted did attest to his compassion, it offered no seal of approval for a socially progressive agenda. On the contrary, as the spiritual leader of the Catholic Church, Pope Pius IX was quite well aware that "a very bitter and fearsome war [was being waged] against the whole Catholic commonwealth."⁴ In his first Encyclical Letter *Qui Pluribus*, the Pontiff denounces those "men bound together in a lawless alliance" who with skillful deceit seek "to quench peoples' zeal for piety, justice and virtue, to corrupt morals, to cast all divine and human laws into confusion, and to weaken and even possibly overthrow the Catholic religion and civil society."⁵ Pius explains that such men present the sacred mysteries of the Catholic faith as if they were "fictions of human invention" opposed to the good of human society.⁶ Not only do they pit human reason against the faith, but they also aim "to import the doctrine of human progress into the Catholic religion."⁷ According to Pope Pius, that importation entailed the rejection of God's supernatural revelation and the demotion of religion to "a philosophical discovery which can be perfected by

⁴ Pius IX, *Qui Pluribus* §4.

⁵ Pius IX, *Qui Pluribus* §4.

⁶ Pius IX, *Qui Pluribus* §4.

⁷ Pius IX, *Qui Pluribus* §5.

human means.”⁸ The rationalists whom Pius opposes aimed at reducing the Catholic religion to a mere human invention wherein reason alone reigned. “Progress” was their battle cry. Despite Pius’s clear opposition to such dangerous intellectual and societal currents, the myth of the “liberal” pope survived, nonetheless, for almost another two years.

In the spring of the pan-European revolutionary year 1848, the hosannas initially sung by those Italians, who had hoped to unite the Italian peninsula in a confederation of states under Pius IX’s leadership, gave way to cries for the Roman Pontiff’s crucifixion. For, despite mounting pressure from Italian patriots, Pius, no less enamored of his own Italian heritage, refused to declare war against Catholic Austria whose rule in Lombardy and the Veneto those same Italian patriots had sought to overthrow. Pius protested that, as the Successor of Saint Peter, he could not engage in a military offensive against his own Catholic faithful. As a result, Italian public opinion quickly turned against him. Seven months later, on November 24, 1848, Pius, dressed in the black cassock of a simple priest, fled clandestinely from Rome, then under hostile revolutionary control, for Gaeta just across the Papal States’ southern border in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. In February, 1849, just as the Pope was inquiring from Gaeta among the worldwide Catholic episcopate of the faithful’s devotion to Mary Immaculate in view of possibly defining her Immaculate Conception, revolutionaries declared Rome a republic. Republican rule, however, did not survive beyond the following summer thanks to a French military intervention on the Pontiff’s behalf. But Pius did not immediately return to his capital. Only on April 12, 1850, did he reenter Rome through the Lateran gate, transferring his residence from the Papal Palace precariously exposed on the Quirinal hill to the Apostolic Palace safely ensconced within the Vatican’s Leonine walls. Pope Pius IX’s brush with revolution served to confirm his opposition to those belligerent currents in contemporary society identified in his first encyclical. He was convinced now more than ever that the principles of 1789, that had unleashed a revolutionary spirit across the European continent, were diametrically opposed to an authentically Christian society.

On December 8, 1864, the tenth anniversary of the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God, Pope Pius IX promulgated his Encyclical Letter *Quanta Cura*. The *Syllabus of Errors* followed shortly thereafter. In what is unquestionably his most controversial encyclical, the Pontiff vehemently denounces the nefarious enterprises of wicked men who seek “to raze the foundations of the Catholic religion and of civil society.”⁹ He exposes their opposition to the Catholic Church, the eternal natural law, and right reason resulting in “the greatest loss of souls and

⁸ Pius IX, *Qui Pluribus* §7.

⁹ Pius IX, *Quanta Cura* §1.

detriment of civil society itself.”¹⁰ According to Pius, these men labor “against the doctrine of Scripture, of the Church, and of the Holy Fathers.”¹¹ They strive to remove all religious discourse from civil society, to banish religion even from private families, to repudiate the doctrine and authority of divine revelation, and to obscure true justice and authentic human rights by means of raw material force.¹² Pius expresses particular concern for the education of youth who would not only be denied the salutary teaching of the Catholic Church, but also be “infected and depraved by every most pernicious error and vice.”¹³ Within this historical context, we can perhaps understand better and sympathize more willingly with the condemnation of the *Syllabus of Errors*’s eightieth thesis that states that “[t]he Roman Pontiff can and must reconcile himself with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization.”¹⁴

Pope Leo XIII’s Inscrutabili Dei Concilio

Six years later, on September 20, 1870, the city of Rome—the last vestige of the Papal States—fell to invading Piedmontese troops. King Vittorio Emanuele II of the House of Savoy took possession of the Quirinal Palace, and his government soon afterwards declared Rome to be the Italian Kingdom’s capital. After those fateful events, Pope Pius IX remained until his death on February 7, 1878, a “prisoner of the Vatican.” To succeed him on the Chair of Saint Peter, the Cardinals, who had gathered in conclave in the Sistine Chapel, elected the Archbishop of Perugia, Gioacchino Cardinal Pecci who took the papal name Leo XIII. The new Pontiff issued his first Encyclical Letter *Inscrutabili Dei Consilio* two months later on April 21, 1878.

In his inaugural encyclical Pope Leo willingly takes up the battle flag that Pius had bequeathed him for the sake of the Church and the salvation of souls. He frankly acknowledges the evils oppressing the human race: the subversion of truth, the obstinacy of mind, the rejection of authority, civil strife, ruthless wars, contempt for law, materialism, suicide, communitarian injustice, the misappropriation of public funds, and “the shamelessness of those who, full of treachery, make semblance of being champions of country, of freedom, and every kind of right.”¹⁵ Leo beholds a

¹⁰ Pius IX, *Quanta Cura* §2.

¹¹ Pius IX, *Quanta Cura* §3.

¹² Pius IX, *Quanta Cura* §4.

¹³ Pius IX, *Quanta Cura* §4.

¹⁴ *Syllabus of Errors*, 80th thesis.

¹⁵ Leo XIII, *Inscrutabili Dei Consilio* §2.

deadly plague “allowing ... no respite and foreboding ever fresh disturbances and final disaster.”¹⁶ Thirty-six years later history proved the Pontiff to have been prophetic when the guns of August in 1914 unleashed upon Europe and across the globe the apocalyptic horror of the First World War. Progress had seemed to go hand-in-hand with peace. But as Margaret MacMillan in her masterful history of the pre-war years, *The War that ended Peace*, rightly remarks, “such faith in progress and reason was sadly misplaced.”¹⁷ The Church’s blind adversaries had, nonetheless, relentlessly portrayed her as opposed to genuine progress. Pius IX and the *Syllabus of Errors*’s resistance to the ideological notion of progress dominant throughout the nineteenth century gave apparent, but indeed only apparent credence to their accusation. In our own day, Pope Francis himself has recently vindicated Pius’s campaign, albeit indirectly, when in reference to the environmental blight, that nineteenth-century industrialization first unleashed upon the planet, he notes that “we can finally leave behind the modern myth of unlimited material progress.”¹⁸ For his part Pope Leo XIII, while not abandoning the course that Pius had plotted, shifted the papal gears and went on the offensive, inaugurating what George Weigel has called the “Leonine Revolution.”¹⁹ In *Inscrutabili Dei Concilio*, Leo proclaims the great benefits that the Catholic Church has provided for civil society because she upholds the principles of truth and the unchanging laws of virtue and justice upon which civilization is grounded.²⁰ The Pontiff insists that the Church’s missionary activity civilizes the evangelized, dispels their superstitions, and helps them to recognize God and to respect themselves. The Church, moreover, has labored for the abolition of slavery, promoted the arts and sciences, and, by means of her charitable institutions, served humanity. Whereas sin leads to disaster, the Gospel creates a civilized culture. “[T]he Church of Christ,” concludes Leo, “far from being alien to or neglectful of progress, has a just claim to all men’s praise as its nurse, its mistress, and its mother.”²¹ The Pontiff most willingly promotes such authentic progress guiding the liberal arts and undergirding civilization. To that end he emphasizes the importance of Catholic education wherein “[p]hilosophy seeks not the overthrow of divine revelation, but delights rather to prepare its way, and defend it against assailants, both by example and

¹⁶ Leo XIII, *Inscrutabili Dei Consilio* §2.

¹⁷ Margaret MacMillan, *The War that ended Peace: How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War* (London: Profile Books, 2014), 19.

¹⁸ Francis, *Landato Sì* §78.

¹⁹ George Weigel, *The Irony of Modern Catholic History*.

²⁰ Leo XIII, *Inscrutabili Dei Consilio* §5.

²¹ Leo XIII, *Inscrutabili Dei Consilio* §5.

in written works, as the great Augustine and the Angelic Doctor, with all other teachers of Christian wisdom, have proved to Us.”²²

The Church in the nineteenth century did not, then, categorically oppose progress. She was, however, on guard against the myth of progress that not only promoted unlimited material advancement, but also rejected the supernatural. The dominant secular ideology confronting the Church recognized reason alone, and militantly factored faith out of all reasonable discourse. Science had become its religion, and technology the *novus ordo* of its worship. Quite rightly did the Catholic Church oppose its naturalism devoid of the supernatural, its materialism devoid of the spiritual, and its rationalism devoid of the faith. In response the Church’s theologians, her bishops gathered in council at the Vatican, and finally the Supreme Pontiff Leo XIII invoked the harmonious rapport between faith and reason that had characterized Christian antiquity and the Middle Ages before its gradual disintegration beginning in the sixteenth century. With its *sola Scriptura, sola fides, sola gratia*, the Protestant Reformation had exalted the faith to the detriment of reason. But by the eighteenth century the pendulum had swung violently in the opposite direction. The Enlightenment glorified reason and ousted the faith. The French Revolution, in turn, weaponized the Enlightenment’s ideas, and the Napoleonic Wars spread their contagion aboard. Such rationalism even succeeded in infiltrating Catholic theology. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the German Catholic theologian Georg Hermes at the University of Bonn attempted to explain the Christian mysteries exclusively and indeed exhaustively by means of rational discourse, rendering the mysteries no longer mysterious. At mid-century the Viennese theologian Anton Günther followed suit. In conscious response to the threat that such rationalism posed, the Cologne theologian Matthias Joseph Scheeben dedicated his entire theological project to restoring the role of the supernatural in theological discourse. It is not by chance that he entitled his most popular and indeed accessible work *The Mysteries of Christianity*.²³ In general, nineteenth-century Catholic theologians aimed at reestablishing a properly ordered relationship between faith and reason that acknowledged revelation’s superiority all the while upholding reason’s legitimate autonomy. They instructed that reason aids revelation not by usurping it, but rather by clarifying and defending it.

Like reason, history when rightly employed immensely benefitted the nineteenth-century theological enterprise. But it also potentially threatened to undermine the stability of dogmatic

²² Leo XIII, *Inscrutabili Dei Consilio* §13.

²³ Cf. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Handbook of the Catholic Dogmatics*, vol. 1.2, trans. Michael J. Miller (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2019), n. 1112, 264: Hermes and Günther “were rationalistic, but in quite different ways, the former more skeptical and sober, along the lines of the Kantian critique, and the latter a bold Gnostic.”

theology when those who employed it envisioned it to be theology's sole criterion. Unlike the Bavarian Church historian Ignaz von Döllinger, the Church's nineteenth-century positive theologians—for example, the Jesuit Professors of the Roman College Giovanni Perrone, Carlo Passaglia, Clemens Schrader, and Johann Baptist Franzelin, along with John Henry Newman—appealed to history in theological discourse, but without falling prey to historicism and the dogmatic relativism that it entailed. They upheld both the immutability of the divinely revealed deposit of faith and its doctrinal articulation across the ages. As Newman masterfully demonstrated, doctrinal development is a necessary, vital force in the life of the Church. For although the apostolic deposit does not increase, that is, there are strictly speaking no new dogmas added to the Church's perennially professed faith, the Church's understanding of her faith does indeed grow. Doctrinal development enriches the Church's profession of faith not *in se*, but rather *quoad nos*. In this regard, doctrine does indeed progress. This insight dates back to the Church Fathers themselves and finds its foundational articulation in the fifth-century *Commonitorium* of Vincent of Lerins. The chief nineteenth-century example of such progress is the 1854 dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God. The Roman theologians who labored for the dogma's definition appealed extensively to doctrinal development in order to account for the dogma's implicit presence in the ancient Church's explicitly professed faith. Indeed, without an authentic notion of development, Pius IX would have been at a loss to define the Marian dogma. By no means then was nineteenth-century Catholic theology at odds with the faith's historical development even though it rightly rejected all absolute novelty foreign to the apostolic deposit.

Pope Leo XIII's Aeterni Patris

In his Encyclical Letter *Aeterni Patris* dedicated to the renewal of Christian philosophy, Leo XIII notes that contemporary woes find their origin in the realm of ideas. When misunderstood and misapplied, the notions of progress, development, and evolution pose a threat not only to the Catholic faith, but indeed to civic society itself. The Pontiff warns that false conclusions regarding things both divine and human, originating “in the schools of philosophy, have now crept into all the orders of the State, and have been accepted by the common consent of the masses.”²⁴ The sins of the human intellect had begun to manifest themselves in the sins of the human will. Erroneously espoused false

²⁴ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §2.

opinions perverted human actions. The remedy lay in right thinking. To that end philosophy plays a crucial role for “on [it] a right interpretation of the other sciences in great part depends.”²⁵

In 1824, at the age of fourteen, Gioacchino Pecci had matriculated at the Roman College newly re-entrusted to the Society of Jesus after the Order’s general suppression in 1773 and its universal restoration in 1814. While a student at the college, Pecci came under the influence of the Jesuit Rector, Father Luigi Taparelli d’Azeglio, who vigorously promoted Thomistic studies at the college to the consternation of his Jesuit confreres. Taparelli met such fierce resistance that his tenure at the college was cut short, but not before he had managed to convince young Pecci of the merits of Thomism. As Archbishop of Perugia, Pecci himself promoted Thomistic philosophy at his diocesan seminary for the intellectual reform of the clergy in order to arm priests with the Church’s own venerable philosophical tradition amid the nineteenth century’s cultural wars. Once elected pope, Leo XIII wasted little time in doing the same for the Universal Church. His encyclical *Aeterni Patris* aims at restoring Christian philosophy through Thomistic studies. But curiously enough, Thomas Aquinas’s name does not appear in the encyclical until the second half. Leo devotes the first half of the encyclical to the Church Fathers. When the Pope does finally turn to Thomas, he extols him above all else for his masterful synthesis of the patristic tradition, observing that “the doctrines of those illustrious men [that is, the Church Fathers], like the scattered members of a body, Thomas collected together and cemented, distributed in wonderful order, and so increased with important additions that he is rightly and deservedly esteemed the special bulwark and glory of the Catholic faith.”²⁶ *Aeterni Patris*, therefore, is as much about the Church Fathers as it is about Thomas Aquinas. It recounts how the Church Fathers employed reason in order to call people back to the path of faith and salvation.²⁷ The ancient Alexandrians, for example, understood philosophy in terms of a stepping stone to the Christian faith, a prelude to Christianity, and an evangelical teacher.²⁸ The Church Fathers in general made ample use of the spoils of Egypt, that is, philosophy and the human sciences, for the good of the faith.²⁹ They esteemed philosophy “as the bulwark of faith and the strong defense of religion.”³⁰ In doing so, they armed themselves with the very arms that the Church’s adversaries employed against her. In order that contemporary philosophy gather its good fruit, Leo counsels it “never to turn aside from that

²⁵ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §1.

²⁶ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §17.

²⁷ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §3.

²⁸ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §4.

²⁹ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §4.

³⁰ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §7.

path which the Fathers have entered upon from a venerable antiquity, and which the [First] Vatican Council solemnly and authoritatively approved.”³¹

Like right reason, contemporary Modernist woes also have their own ancient pedigree. Without the benefit of the Christian faith, ancient pagan philosophers fell into appalling errors, offering posterity a mixed bag of truth and falsehood. But the Church Fathers and later Doctors of the Church “took up and investigated the books of the ancient philosophers, and compared their teachings with the doctrines of revelation, and, carefully sifting them, they cherished what was true and wise in them and amended or rejected all else.”³² In this methodology, the ancient Fathers set the standard for the Church’s engagement with the world. In the process, they also met with stern opposition from polytheists, materialists, and determinists who derided Christian dogmas and institutions.³³ Undeterred, the Church Fathers confronted these false philosophers just as the ancient Christian martyrs had witnessed valiantly to the faith before pagan tyrants.³⁴ Adroitly wielding arms taken from despoiled Egyptians, as it were, the ancient Christian Apologists derived their own arguments from human wisdom in order to demonstrate the One God’s preeminent perfection, his creative omnipotence, and his wise providence.³⁵ In this battle some Church Fathers and ancient ecclesiastical writers distinguished themselves more than others—for example, Justin Martyr³⁶ and Origen of Alexandria.³⁷ Of the latter’s voluminous works, Pope Leo remarks that, “though, as they now stand, [they are] not altogether free from error, [they] contain nevertheless a wealth of knowledge tending to the growth and advance of natural truths.”³⁸ Leo similarly singles out the writings of Athanasius and John Chrysostom.³⁹ But, according to Leo, Augustine “wrested the palm from all [...] Of a most powerful genius and thoroughly saturated with sacred and profane learning, with the loftiest faith and with equal knowledge, he combatted most vigorously all the errors of his age.”⁴⁰ When Leo does finally arrive at the medieval Schoolmen, he lauds them in reference to the Church Fathers. Their merit lies in their fidelity to the patristic tradition. As Leo explains, “later on, the doctors of the middle ages, who are called Scholastics, addressed themselves to a great work—that of diligently collecting

³¹ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §8.

³² Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §10.

³³ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §10.

³⁴ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §10.

³⁵ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §11.

³⁶ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §11.

³⁷ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §12.

³⁸ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §12.

³⁹ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §12.

⁴⁰ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §13.

and sifting, and storing up, as it were, in one place, for the use and convenience of posterity the rich and fertile harvests of Christian learning scattered abroad in the voluminous works of the holy Fathers.”⁴¹ In thanking Pope Leo for his third encyclical, John Henry Cardinal Newman lauded this continuity, insisting that contemporary Catholic intellectual exercises “should be grafted on the Catholic tradition of philosophy, and should not start from a novel and simply original tradition, but should be substantially one with the teaching of St Athanasius, St Augustine, St Anselm, and St Thomas, as those great Doctors in turn are one with each other.”⁴²

Both positive and speculative theologians in the nineteenth century highlighted this inherent continuity between the ancient Fathers and the medieval Schoolmen. Of course, they also recognized the distinct methodologies that distinguish those respective ages. But their emphasis lay on the Fathers’ and the Scholastics’ common faith and concerns. The Scholastics built upon a patristic foundation, carrying forward with ever greater precision the Fathers’ theological insights. Of course, neither the Fathers nor the Scholastics were monolithic in their approach to philosophy and theology. Differences naturally arose. Errors did not go unchallenged. But the pervasive novelty so characteristic of the modern age did not hold sway—the ancient Gnostics and the occasional medieval heretic notwithstanding.

Since the dawn of modernity, however, philosophical systems without respect for the faith have multiplied. Differing conclusions regarding crucial questions regularly clash. Doubt and error have taken root. Leo laments that “this new pursuit seems to have caught the souls of certain Catholic philosophers, who, throwing aside the patrimony of ancient wisdom, chose rather to build up a new edifice than to strengthen and complete the old by aid of the new—ill-advisedly, in sooth, and not without detriment to the sciences.”⁴³ Lacking a sturdy, common foundation, the novel totters.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Leo does not dismiss out right the good that new discoveries can bring to contemporary philosophical discourse. He affirms that “every word of wisdom, every useful thing by whomsoever discovered or planned, ought to be received with a willing and grateful mind.”⁴⁵ But he cautions against mere erudition and its infatuation with the novel. The Pontiff warns that “in the tempest that is on us the Christian faith is being constantly assailed by the machinations and craft of a certain false

⁴¹ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §14.

⁴² John Henry Newman, *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, vol. 19, edited by Charles Stephen Dessain and Thomas Gornall, S.J. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 212.

⁴³ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §24.

⁴⁴ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §24.

⁴⁵ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §31.

wisdom.”⁴⁶ Like Pius IX before him, Leo is especially concerned about the education of youth who are “the growing hope of the Church.”⁴⁷ He advises that “apart from the supernatural help of God, nothing is better calculated to heal those minds and to bring them into favor with the Catholic faith than the solid doctrine of the Fathers and the Scholastics.”⁴⁸

Pope Leo XIII's Providentissimus Deus

On November 18, 1893, in the eighteenth year of his pontificate, Pope Leo XIII promulgated his Encyclical Letter *Providentissimus Deus* on the study of Scripture. Not only did the Pontiff desire that Scripture “should be made safely and abundantly accessible to the flock of Jesus Christ,” but also that no attempt be made “to defile or corrupt it, either on the part of those who impiously and openly assail the Scriptures, or of those who are led astray into fallacious and imprudent novelties.”⁴⁹ In the sixteenth century, Protestant reliance on private judgment and its consequent repudiation of the tradition and the Church’s magisterium had presented a serious challenge for biblical studies. But by the nineteenth century, a far more formidable foe had arisen that threatened not only the Catholic Church, but also the Protestants’ sole scriptural authority. “Now, we have to meet the Rationalists, true children and inheritors of the older heretics,” explains Leo, “who, trusting in their turn to their own way of thinking, have rejected even the scraps and remnants of Christian belief which had been handed down to them.”⁵⁰ The Rationalists denied God’s supernatural revelation, the Bible’s divine inspiration, and the scriptural accounts’ authenticity. They specifically rejected the prophetic and the miraculous, reducing the former to merely natural predictions, and the latter to either “the startling effects of natural law, or else mere tricks and myths.”⁵¹ To remedy this proto-Modernist woe, Pope Leo appeals to the patristic tradition and Thomistic thought.

As Leo explains, Scripture formed the heart of the Fathers’ preaching.⁵² Through their preaching, the Fathers demonstrated, moreover, that Scripture is the soul of theology.⁵³ From the Scriptures read within the Church’s living tradition, the Church Fathers not only established the

⁴⁶ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §27.

⁴⁷ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §27.

⁴⁸ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §27.

⁴⁹ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* §2.

⁵⁰ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* §10.

⁵¹ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* §10.

⁵² Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* §5.

⁵³ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* §16.

articles of faith, but also derived “the refutation of heretical error, and the reasonableness, the true meaning, and the mutual relation of the truths of Catholicism.”⁵⁴ In the Christian East, the stellar example of the ancient ecclesiastical writer Origen shines forth most especially while Augustine and Jerome distinguish themselves among the Latin Fathers.⁵⁵ Leo notes further that, over the course of the Christian centuries, Thomas Aquinas and his fellow Scholastics brought “fresh and welcome progress in the study of the Bible.”⁵⁶ The Pontiff explains that Thomistic philosophy and theology are especially useful for detecting and overcoming “the sophisms and labored erudition of the Rationalists.”⁵⁷ But the Pope particularly praises the century after Trent “when it almost seemed that the great age of the Fathers had returned.”⁵⁸ Citing both the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council, Leo recognizes the supreme authority of the *consensus patrum* in scriptural interpretation—an authority on par with the Church’s magisterium. For, given that the vast majority of the Church Fathers were themselves bishops, their consensus indubitably represents the ancient Church’s magisterium. Thus, when the Church Fathers teach unanimously on questions of faith and morals, they do so infallibly. They witness to the doctrine’s apostolic origins.⁵⁹ But when they teach individually, their opinions, though “of great weight,”⁶⁰ enjoy no similar guarantee. Nonetheless, we ought always to engage the Fathers with due reverence even though we are by no means obliged simply to assimilate a petrified past. “[I]t is not forbidden” Leo instructs, “when just cause exists, to push inquiry and exposition beyond what the Fathers have done.”⁶¹ Indeed, the Pontiff sanctions a developmental discernment that recognizes the patristic age’s normative status, adheres to the Fathers’ consensus, and allows for legitimate progress in those matters where the Fathers have proven to be inadequate. Consequently, Pope Leo willingly admits, for example, that in some things the Fathers have been surpassed. As he observes, “in commenting on passages where physical matters occur, [the Fathers] have sometime expressed ideas of their own times, and thus made statements which in these days have been abandoned as incorrect.”⁶² Thus does Leo strike a proper balance between the divinely revealed apostolic tradition to which the Church Fathers notably attest and modernity’s discoveries that help to advance our knowledge. Against the Rationalists’ campaign to desiccate the Scriptures,

⁵⁴ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* §16.

⁵⁵ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* §7.

⁵⁶ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* §7.

⁵⁷ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* §16.

⁵⁸ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* §8.

⁵⁹ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* §14.

⁶⁰ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* §14.

⁶¹ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* §15.

⁶² Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* §19.

moreover, the Pontiff defends the supernaturally revealed faith all the while acknowledging natural reason's legitimate role in its development, that is, in our ever-deepening understanding of the divine revelation. To proceed accordingly is to proceed without fail.

Pius X's Pascendi Dominici Gregis

On the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lady, September 8, 1907, Pope Pius X promulgated his anti-Modernist encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*. As our survey has demonstrated, that papal encyclical did not just materialize out of thin air. It was rather the culmination of concerns already raised by the Roman Pontiff's two immediate predecessors. The concerns voiced by both Pope Pius IX and Pope Leo XIII had simply come home to roost in the ecclesial nest. In *Providentissimus Deus*, Leo had in fact already identified problematic methodologies among Catholic theologians and professors.⁶³ But Pius X perceived an even more pervasive danger, exclaiming that “the partisans of error are to be sought not only among the Church's open enemies; but what is to be most dreaded and deplored, in her very bosom, and are the more mischievous the less they keep in the open.”⁶⁴ The Pope laments that not a few Catholic priests and laity have been “thoroughly imbued with the poisonous doctrines taught by the enemies of the Church.”⁶⁵ Indeed, “the danger is present almost to the very veins and heart of the Church.”⁶⁶ According to Pius X, the Modernist takes the form of believer, theologian, historian, critic, apologist, and reformer. However he may make himself manifest, he promotes an agenda of agnosticism, immanentism, and evolutionism in opposition to Catholic teaching.⁶⁷ His agnosticism, inspired by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, confines human reason “entirely within the field of phenomena,” rejecting any possible consideration of God's intervention in human history.⁶⁸ Hence, “both science and history must be atheistic.”⁶⁹ The Modernist's immanentism, following closely upon his denial of all external, historical revelation, reduces religious faith to the realm of human subjectivity, confining the faith to “a certain interior sense, originating in a need of the divine.”⁷⁰ As a result, dogmatic formulas no longer authentically

⁶³ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* §10.

⁶⁴ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §2.

⁶⁵ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §2.

⁶⁶ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §3.

⁶⁷ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §34.

⁶⁸ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §6.

⁶⁹ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §6.

⁷⁰ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §7.

express supernaturally revealed truths, but rather “have no other purpose than to furnish the believer with a means of giving to himself an account of his faith.”⁷¹ For the Modernist, the Church’s Sacraments function similarly. They are bare symbols that give sensible form to the religious sense just as popular slogans help to circulate leading ideas—nothing more. They otherwise have no efficacy.⁷² The Modernist’s notion of the *intrinsic* evolution of dogmas follows. Since dogma merely articulates a subjective religious sentiment, it ought to change continually in order to meet the needs of the one who believes.⁷³ It changes, however, not simply *quoad nos*—that is, in terms of our deeper comprehension of revealed, immutable truth. No, the change is indeed far more radical. Dogma, the subjective fruit of religious sentiment, changes in itself. Truth, therefore, is no longer eternal. Nothing remains normative. Everything—the very faith itself—is relative and liable to change in order to serve contemporary needs. It should hardly astonish us, then, when Pope Pius X denounces Modernism as “the synthesis of all heresies,” for it truly does amount to “the destruction not of the Catholic religion alone, but of all religion.”⁷⁴ As eighteenth-century rationalism had steadily served to factor God out of nineteenth-century civil society, Modernism factors God out of the religious equation, reducing religious faith to a merely subjective, ever-evolving, personal experience. It denies the possibility of an historical revelation, and it gives free reign to novelty in religious discourse. Ultimately, nothing is sacred.

As such, Modernism diametrically opposes the Catholic profession of faith in the Word’s Incarnation, that is, God’s personal, supernatural intervention in human history. It undermines the faith that the apostles had received from Christ in its fulness under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that they, in turn, preached to others, recorded in the Scriptures, and handed on to their successors. The apostles’ immediate successors, of course, were the early Church Fathers. Perhaps, on this account, Modernists wage “unrelenting war” against the Church Fathers together with scholastic philosophy and the Church’s magisterium.⁷⁵ As Pius notes, “[w]ith consummate temerity [Modernist theologians] assure the public that the Fathers, while personally most worthy of all veneration, were entirely ignorant of history and criticism, for which they are only excusable on account of the time in which they lived.”⁷⁶ In this manner do Modernists seek to dismiss the Fathers’ credible historical witness to and their theological interpretation of the revealed, traditionary faith. For

⁷¹ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §12.

⁷² Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §21.

⁷³ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §13.

⁷⁴ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §34.

⁷⁵ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §42.

⁷⁶ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §42.

their part, the Church Fathers offer a perennial, fourfold remedy to Modernist woes (1) in their witness to the divine truth that Christ has historically revealed and that they themselves have received; (2) in their defense of the faith against ancient pagans, Gnostics, and heretics; (3) in their opposition to novel inventions; and (4) in their staunch support for the definitive, dogmatic acquisitions that arise from a genuine doctrinal development that neither augments nor betrays the apostolic faith, but rather delves ever more deeply into its sacred mysteries. In sum, the Fathers exemplify a dynamic fidelity diametrically opposed to the Modernists' progressive betrayal.

Conclusion

Despite its notable advances, modernity has witnessed a religious and intellectual systemic crash that has undermined the robust, properly ordered relationship between faith and reason adroitly crafted in Christian antiquity and the Middle Ages. The Modernist heresy is its most virulent variant. As Pope Pius X alerted us over a century ago, “Modernism leads to atheism and to the annihilation of all religion. The error of Protestantism made the first step on this path; that of Modernism makes the second; atheism makes the next.”⁷⁷ Under twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, that final step became a goose step that stomped militantly upon all religious belief. Even now, as Rod Dreher observes in his 2020 book *Live Not By Lies*, “the essence of modernity is to deny that there are any transcendent stories, structures, habits, or beliefs to which individuals must submit and that should bind our conduct.”⁷⁸ Indeed, Modernism denies the supernatural any role in religious and rational discourse. Its agnosticism reduces religion to sentiment whose vital immanence results in a rampant relativism responding to the ever-evolving zeitgeist. Religious faith and civil society are simply left adrift. After such a tremendous systemic crash, our only hope for rebooting the system lies in the recovery of memory. For if we were to lose our memory, then, all would indeed be lost.

Memory has become the battle ground for culture. As Pius X observed, Modernists “exercise all their ingenuity in an effort to weaken the force and falsify the character of tradition, so as to rob it of all its weight and authority.”⁷⁹ They “destroy as far as they can the pious traditions of the people, and bring into disrespect certain relics highly venerable from their antiquity.”⁸⁰ Modernist iconoclasts dismantle the past in order to fashion a novel future according to their own designs. They are the

⁷⁷ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §39.

⁷⁸ Rod Dreher, *Live Not By Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (New York: Sentinel, 2020), 115.

⁷⁹ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §42.

⁸⁰ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* §43.

“ideologues in power, both in classrooms and newsrooms,” of whom Dreher speaks, who “manipulate collective memory to capture the future.”⁸¹ The present destruction of public statuary, for example, dramatically characterizes the contemporary cancel culture that has exploded in the West. Its perpetrators are the Modernists’ rightful heirs. But, as the Roman Pontiffs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have warned us, far more subtle and destructive forms of annihilation are operative within both the *academia* and the *ecclesia*. Against such Modernist woes, the Church Fathers offer us a most salutary remedy, for they assure our memory that is nothing other than the vital sap of the present. They witness collectively to the supernaturally revealed truth contained fully within the apostolic deposit of faith that remains a living force across the ages. They comment masterfully on Scripture. They hand on authoritatively the Church’s living tradition and promote insightfully its ever-deeper comprehension. They model extraordinarily the right relationship between faith and reason. They are without question the bedrock of Christian culture, for, after the apostles, they were the first to evangelize the cultures of the ancient world. Consequently, they remain even now a foundational norm of our collective Christian memory.

We live in the modern age. If we are to live in it well, then, we must cherish the *maiorum traditio*—the ever-vital tradition of our elders in the faith. We must cultivate in our own day the Church’s collective memory rooted in Christian antiquity, masterfully synthesized by the medieval Schoolmen, magisterially articulated by the prelates and theologians at Trent, and courageously proclaimed by the Catholic Church throughout the modern age. As the Modernist tempest rages ever more fiercely around us, we ourselves are called to be ever more firmly rooted in Christianity’s collective memory—that is, in the Church’s living tradition—for the present and future good of both the Church and civic society.

FATHER JOSEPH CAROLA, S.J.
Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, USA
23 September 2021

⁸¹ Rod Dreher, *Live Not By Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (New York: Sentinel, 2020), 115.