

The Catholic Crisis Over “Us”



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[Syndicated Column](#)

By [GEORGE WEIGEL](#)

Cambridge historian Richard Rex has provocatively proposed that Catholicism today is embroiled in the third great crisis of its bimillennial history.

The first crisis was the fierce, Church-dividing debate over “What is God?” That question was definitively answered by the First Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) and the Council of Chalcedon (451). Nicaea I affirmed that Jesus is truly God, the second person of the Trinity; Chalcedon affirmed that, through the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, divinity and humanity are united in the one person of Jesus Christ. Thus Nicaea I and Chalcedon established the trinitarian and incarnational foundations of Christian orthodoxy for all time.

The second crisis, which led to the fracture of Western Christendom in the various sixteenth-century Protestant Reformations, revolved around the question, “What is the Church?” The Council of Trent gave the orthodox response to that question, in answers refined over time by Pope Pius XII’s teaching on the Church as the “Mystical Body of Christ,” by the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, and by the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, which synthesized Vatican II’s teaching by describing the Church as a communion of disciples in mission.

And the third crisis, through which we’re living? That, Professor Rex argued, involves “. . . a question that would once have been expressed as ‘What is man?’ The fact that this wording is now itself seen as problematic is a symptom of the very condition it seeks to diagnose. What is it, in other words, to be human?” That, Rex rightly contends, is what’s at issue in “an entire alphabet of beliefs and practices: abortion, bisexuality, contraception, divorce, euthanasia, family, gender, homosexuality, infertility treatment. . . .” And so forth and so on, across the cratered battlefields of a culture war that, beginning outside the Church, is now being fought within the household of faith.

So: first, a “theological” crisis, in the literal meaning of theology: “speaking about God.” Then an ecclesiological crisis. And now an anthropological crisis. The previous two crises were Church-dividing. The third could well be, as demonstrated by the German apostasy that is threatening to fracture the unity of the Catholic Church, and by the abandonment of Catholicism’s biblically-grounded understanding of the human person by prominent bishops, theologians, and activists.

The question, “Who are we as human beings?,” is most sharply posed by gender ideology and the transgender insurgency. This has now reached the point of absurdity wherein “a drag queen on the Isle of Man” (as Mary Wakefield reported last month in the Spectator) “informed Year 7 pupils that there are exactly 73 genders. When one brave child insisted that there were only two, the drag queen allegedly responded ‘You’ve upset me’ and sent the child out.”

But there is something even worse than this abandonment of any pretense to educational seriousness. And that is the abandonment of any pretense to medical professionalism by American doctors who, influenced more by gender ideology than “the science,” and affirmed in their irresponsibility by the American Academy of Pediatrics, prescribe puberty-blocking drugs and cross-sex hormones to children suffering from the serious mental health problem of gender dysphoria.

This therapeutic cave-in to wokery in the U.S. has now been challenged by the editors of the venerable British news magazine The Economist (firmly center-left in its politics), whose editors note that “the medical systems of Britain, Finland, France, Norway and Sweden” have “all . . . raised the alarm, describing [these] treatments as ‘experimental’ and urging doctors to proceed with ‘great medical caution.’”

Then there is Cole Aronson, an Orthodox Jew and keen student of philosophy, who published a devastating ethical critique of “sex-reassignment” surgeries on the website Public Discourse. Aronson concluded by observing that it’s not only those on the left who must reconsider gender ideology and transgenderism: “Conservatives need to choose between their impulse to let people live as they damn well please and their opposition to the grisly stuff being done by scientists and surgeons.”

The voice of the Church is too often muted here, precisely because the Church is ensnared in a crisis over “us”: a crisis over the nature and destiny of the human. The gospel demands pastoral charity toward those suffering from gender dysphoria and experiencing same-sex attraction. That charity, however, must include truth-telling about who we are, which we learn from divine revelation and human reason. And what we learn from those sources is that gender ideology is as false a god, and as destructive of body and soul, as Baal and Moloch.

Who will say this at the next papal conclave and at Synod 2023?

George Weigel is Distinguished Senior Fellow of Washington, D.C.’s Ethics and Public Policy Center, where he holds the William E. Simon Chair in Catholic Studies.

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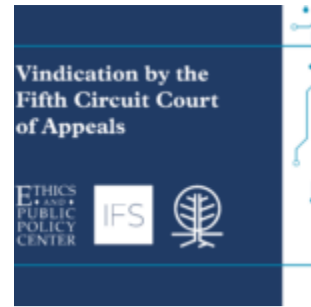
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