

# Modernism

## *The Synthesis of All Heresies*

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In the encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, Pope St. Pius X condemned the errors of the Modernists, whom he prophetically referred to as “the most pernicious of all the adversaries of the Church”. In condemning this vast system, which he rightly termed “the synthesis of all heresies”, he explained that the Modernist assumes the various personalities of “*a philosopher, a believer, a theologian, an historian, a critic, an apologist, a reformer*”, and then proceeded to expound the errors of each personality in systematic fashion. In this article, we will consider the errors of the Modernist as a *philosopher*, who “lays the ax not to the branches and shoots, but to the very root, that is, to the faith and its deepest fibers” (1). Since the errors of Modernism are subtle and often difficult to discern, we will begin by reviewing what the Church teaches regarding faith, by distinguishing between the object of faith, the virtue of faith, and the act of faith. By having these clear distinctions fresh in our mind, we will more easily perceive the errors of this most crafty enemy.

**The Object:** The Deposit of Faith consists of the complete Revelation of Jesus Christ, and is contained within the two sources of revelation, namely, Scripture and Tradition. “Christ Our Lord entrusted the truth which He had brought from heaven to the Apostles, and through them to their successors”. (2) This Revelation, which contains the doctrines that make up the Catholic Faith, “has been committed as a Divine deposit to the spouse of Christ, to be faithfully guarded and infallibly interpreted by her”. (3) Over the course of centuries doctrines contained within the Deposit are clarified and defined by the *ecclesia docens* (the magisterum), but nothing new can be added that is not contained, at least implicitly, in the Deposit of Faith, for public revelation ceased with the death of the last apostle. (4)

**The Virtue:** The virtue of faith is a supernatural virtue that dwells within the intellect, the purpose of which is to help us believe the truths God has revealed.

Quoting the First Vatican Council, Pope Leo XIII wrote: “Faith, as the Church teaches, is ‘that supernatural virtue by which, through the help of God and through the assistance of His grace, we believe what he has revealed to be true, not on account of the intrinsic truth perceived by the natural light of reason, but because of the authority of God Himself, the Revealer, who can neither deceive nor be deceived’ (First Vatican Council, Sess. iii., cap. 3).” (5) The virtue of faith has been called *the pupil of the intellect* (6) (which is the eye of the soul), since it provides a supernatural light to the mind which enables the one who possesses it to see the truth in the teachings Christ has revealed.

**The Act:** When the Church proposes a doctrine for belief, as being divinely revealed, the individual Catholic must give assent to this truth. “All those things are to be believed by divine and Catholic faith which are contained in the written or unwritten word of God, and which are proposed by the Church as divinely revealed, either by a solemn definition or in the exercise of its ordinary and universal Magisterium”. (First Vatican Council) The *formal object* of Faith is God revealing; the *material object* of faith is each individual doctrine, as well as the entire Deposit as a whole. The act of faith takes place when man, moved by the virtue of faith and grace, accepts and embraces a truth that is contained within the Deposit and proposed for belief by the Church. “This faith is an act of the intellect made under the sway of the will. By it we hold firmly what God has revealed and what the Church proposes to us to believe”. (7)

To summarize, the teachings of the Catholicism have been revealed by God and passed down to us an objective body of doctrines, which is called *The Deposit of Faith*. The *virtue of faith* dwells within the intellect and helps us to believe the truths God has revealed to man. The *act of faith* takes place when an individual adheres, with his intellect and will, to the individual doctrines contained within the Deposit and proposed for belief by the Church. With all this in mind, we will now consider the errors of Modernism regarding faith, revelation, and dogma.

**Modernism:** Modernism, which is founded on the philosophical error of agnosticism, rejects the idea that God has revealed Himself to man through public revelation. Hence, “all external revelation [is] absolutely denied.” (8)

Consequently, they reject the Deposit of Faith, and the immutable truth of the doctrines contained within it. Having rejecting external public revelation, which is the foundation of the true religion, Modernists claim that religion originates from within man – from a divine principle which they call *vital immanence*. This “divine within”, as understood by the Modernists, is not to be confused with actual grace, by which God enlightens the mind to a truth, and moves the will to the good; nor is it to be confused with sanctifying grace, a completely gratuitous gift, distinct from the nature of man, that God infuses into the soul at baptism, and which remains as a permanent superadded quality of the soul, unless it is forfeited by man through sin. On the contrary, for a Modernist, *vital immanence* is a part of man’s nature, *a divine seminal principle* that belongs to man as a conscious being. They claim that this “divine within” is the well-spring, the font, “the germ of all religion”. (9)

This divine principle within man first manifests itself, and is perceived, as a “need for the divine”. This need for the divine produces a sentimental movement of the heart – a “religious sense”, and “it is this sense to which Modernists give the name faith” (10). Faith, for a Modernist, is nothing but “a sentiment which originates from a need of the divine”. (11)

In the Modernist system, *vital immanence* takes the place of God, and is at once “the revealer and the revealed”, manifest as a “religious sense” which is a sentiment of the heart. This *religious sense*, which springs from the “divine within”, takes the place of the virtue of faith. As we saw earlier, the virtue of faith dwells within the intellect and helps us to believe the truths that God has revealed to man through public external revelation. The *religious sense* on the other hand, dwells in the heart, and helps man to *discover* the truth “revealed” by the divine principle within man; for as Pius X explains, not only is this sense of the heart considered “faith”, but it contains within it “revelation”. He wrote: “But we have not yet reached the end of their philosophizing, or, to speak more accurately, of their folly. Modernists find in this *sense* not only faith, but in and with faith, as they understand it, they affirm that there is also to be found revelation”. (12)

We can see that for the Modernists, revelation does not constitute objective truth revealed by God to man, but is something that man discovers within himself. This pretended “revelation” springs forth from a divine principle within man, and is discerned in the “consciousness”, which, for a Modernist, is itself identical with *revelation*. “Hence it is” wrote St. Pius X, “that they make consciousness and revelation synonymous”. (13) For the Modernist, “Revelation is not a doctrine received from God, but on the contrary the subjective fruit of the concept of God which springs forth ... from the depth of our conscience or consciousness”. (14) This revelation springing from the “divine within”, which is discerned in the individual consciousness, is manifested externally by the “general consciousness” of the multitude. Which brings us to the next error of Modernism: The origin of dogma.

**Origin of Dogma:** Up to this point everything we have discussed has taken place within the heart, the origin and well-spring of Modernist’ “revelation”; but we have now reached the point where the intellect is engaged. The purpose of the intellect, according to Modernism, is to give formal expression to the “revelation” that originates in the heart, is perceived by the individual consciousness, and finally manifested by the “general consciousness”. This formulation of “dogma” takes place in two phases: first there is an initial *simple formula*, which attempts to give expression to the general consciousness, but which is not always precise. This is then followed by a *secondary formula*, a proposition that is more perfect and precise than the first, and which, if sanctioned by the magisterium, becomes dogma; for according to the Modernists, the purpose of the magisterium is merely to sanction what has been “revealed” internally to man, manifested externally by the “general consciousness”, and sufficiently formulated by the theologians. Pius X explained it this way:

“So far, Venerable Brethren, there has been no mention of the intellect. Still it also, according to the teaching of the Modernists, has its part in the act of faith. And it is of importance to see how. In that *sentiment* of which We have frequently spoken, since sentiment is not knowledge, God indeed presents Himself to man, but in a manner so confused and indistinct that He can hardly be perceived by the believer. It is therefore

necessary that a ray of light should be cast upon this sentiment, so that God may be clearly distinguished and set apart from it. This is the task of the intellect, whose office it is to reflect and to analyse, and by means of which man first transforms into mental pictures the vital phenomena which arise within him, and then expresses them in words. Hence the common saying of Modernists: that the religious man must *ponder* his faith. - The intellect, then, encountering this sentiment directs itself upon it, and produces in it a work resembling that of a painter who restores and gives new life to a picture that has perished with age. The simile is that of one of the leaders of Modernism. The operation of the intellect in this work is a double one: first by a natural and spontaneous act it expresses its concept in a simple, ordinary statement; then, on reflection and deeper consideration, or, as they say, '*by elaborating its thought*', it expresses the idea in *secondary* propositions, which are derived from the first, but are more perfect and distinct. These *secondary* propositions, if they finally receive the approval of the supreme *magisterium* of the Church, constitute dogma". (15)

While it is true that dogmatic definitions are formulated into propositions by the Church, these propositions do not give expression to the "general consciousness" of the multitude; but rather articulate, in a precise manner, a particular truth contained within the Deposit of Faith. For a Modernist, dogma is not a truth revealed by God and defined by the Church; it is a truth revealed within man, and sanctioned by the Church. They completely invert the order by making man, not God, the principle of revealed truth, and the source of all religion.

**All Religions are True:** According to Modernism, religion is nothing more than man attempting to give external expression to the *religious sense* that he "experiences" within. Hence, for a Modernist, all religions are true, since they all spring from the same divine principle within man. "Indeed Modernists do not deny but actually admit", wrote St. Pius X, "that all religions are true. That they cannot feel otherwise is clear. For on what ground, according to their theories, could falsity be predicated of any religion whatsoever? ... In the conflict between different religions, the most that Modernists can maintain is

that the Catholic has more truth because it is more living and that it deserves with more reason the name of Christian because it corresponds more fully with the origins of Christianity". (16) A Modernist may believe that one religion is more true than another, insofar as it more "fully" expresses the divine within, but all are true to a degree. Hence a Modernist is, by necessity, ecumenical, and will logically show "profound respect" for "the great religions of the world" (17) - not simply for individuals who might belong to these religions, but respect for the false religions themselves - since they too, according to the Modernist, spring from the same divine principle.

**Evolution:** According to the Modernists, everything is in a continual process of evolution. Man began as a lower form of life, and eventually reached the level of a conscious being. This evolutionary process will continue until man finally becomes conscious that he himself is God. Jesus, according to a Modernist, is not God who became man through the Incarnation, in order to satisfy the justice of God and thereby redeem man from sin, but simply a man who became "aware" that he was God. According to them "the divinity of Jesus was his own *awareness* of it". (18) Jesus was simple a more highly evolved man, who "came to reveal man to himself" - that is, to reveal to man that he is also God!

Now, since the Modernists believe that "revelation and consciousness are synonymous", and since they believe man's consciousness is in a constant state of evolution, it follows that revelation itself will advance through the course of time, in correspondence with the ever-evolving consciousness of man. This explains how a Modernist can reject, without a scruple, what has been taught by the Church since the beginning. After all, if man is continuously evolving to a higher "consciousness", and if revelation is nothing more than the "general consciousness" of man at a particular phase of the evolutionary process; and if he believes that modern man is more evolved than those who preceded him, why would he not accept a new "truth" - a new revelation - that corresponds to the more advanced reason he imagines himself to possess? An "enlightened" Modernist will naturally consider himself superior to those who preceded him, and to those less evolved men of his own time who still hold to the religious teachings of antiquity. This explains why the Modernists in the hierarchy will

show great tolerance for a man such Hans Kung, who may simply be ahead of his time, while at the same time these same Modernist prelates will react with disgust toward someone like Archbishop Lefebvre, who refused to abandon the perennial teaching of the Church and the dogmatic decrees of the councils. This also explains why a Modernist would shy away from the idea of objective immutable truth, and from holding firmly to any dogma, lest in so doing he risk the danger of not progressing to the next evolutionary phase of “higher consciousness”.

**Life = Truth:** Since Modernists reject the idea of a public external revelation as the foundation of the true religion, and instead hold that religion emanates from a divine principle within man, how will he know if a religion is “authentic”? For the Modernists, if something is alive they consider it evidence that it is true. “For the Modernists” wrote Pius X, “to live is a proof of truth, since for them life and truth are one and the same thing”. (19) Now, since Modernists believe that all living things are evolving, and since evolution involves change, for something to be alive it must continually change; that which is not changing is not alive, and therefore not true. Hence, according to Modernism, for religion to remain true, it must be subject to continuous change – to an ongoing “aggiornamento” – and this change will not be limited to the external Rites, but to truth itself! Which brings us to the next error: Evolution of Dogma.

**Evolution of Dogma:** According to the Modernists, a dogmatic definition does not express absolute immutable truth, but is merely a useful tool - a symbol – used to express the “truth” of a particular time – a “truth” that is manifest by the “general consciousness” of the people. As man evolves to a higher consciousness, truth itself, and the dogmas that express it, will need to be updated and changed. “Hence”, wrote St. Pius X, according to the Modernists “it is quite impossible to maintain that [dogmas] express absolute truth: for, in so far as they are *symbols*, they are the images of truth, and so must be adapted to the religious sentiment in its relation to man... Consequently, the formulae too, which we call dogmas, must be subject to these vicissitudes, and are, therefore, liable to change. Thus the way is open to the intrinsic *evolution* of dogma. An immense collection of sophisms that ruin and destroy all religion.

Dogma is not only able, but ought to evolve and to be changed. This is strongly affirmed by the Modernists, and clearly flows from their principles”. (20)

Evolution of dogma may be one of the greatest traps for Catholics today. By claiming that dogmas evolve and change from one meaning to another, Catholics are led by the Modernists to reject what the Church has always taught in favor of new teachings. The truth is that not only are dogmas infallibly articulated expressions of immutable truth, but *the understanding* of them is immutable as well. In other words, not only is the dogmatic formula infallible, but the way in which the formula is *understood* is itself fixed. It is never permitted to depart from what the Church has taught under the pretext of a “deeper understanding”, as the First Vatican Council teaches:

“The doctrine of the faith which God revealed has not been handed down as a philosophic invention to the human mind to be perfected, but has been entrusted as a divine Deposit to the Spouse of Christ, to be faithfully guarded and infallibly interpreted. Hence, also, that understanding of its sacred dogmas must be perpetually retained, which Holy Mother Church has once declared; and there must never be recession from that meaning under the specious name of a deeper understanding”. (21)

And again...

“If anyone shall have said that it is possible that to the dogmas declared by the Church a meaning must sometimes be attributed according to the progress of science, different from that which the Church has understood and understands: let him be anathema”. (22)

One of the tactics employed by the Modernists to promote the evolution of dogma, is to refer to it as “development of doctrine”. True development of doctrine, which differs substantially from the heresy of evolution of dogma, can be understood in two ways: it can refer to a greater clarity in the manner of expressing a truth that has always been believed, or it can be understood as defining explicitly a doctrine that has always been believed implicitly. Regarding the latter, Bishop Tissier de Mallerais explained that through the centuries, there is an increase in the number of propositions, but no new Revelation. He wrote:

“In the New Testament there is an increase in the *propositions* by the organs of Tradition, especially the Magisterium, and hence a passage



from the implicit to the explicit.... There is then a development, not in the articles of the Faith but in the explanation of the truths of the revealed deposit. ... It is a development like a bud which blossoms... like a bud which opens up very beautifully, but remains the same bud. There is an unfolding, but without alteration; a displaying of all that which had been contained within from the outset. One calls this homogeneous because there is no mutation. It is the same living species, the same plant, it is a development without mutation, it is the same reality unfolding itself and making explicit all its details, but it is the same reality.” (23)

True doctrinal development never departs from the original understanding, but only adds greater clarity to what was always believed, at least implicitly. Evolution of dogma, on the other hand, results in a substantial change in the *meaning* of the doctrine. Sometimes evolution of dogma will manifest itself in an explicit denial of the dogmatic formula itself. For example, when *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* is brought up, it is not uncommon to hear a Modernist say “we don’t believe that anymore”. Some of the more “conservative” Modernists will begrudgingly accept the proposition, but then water it down to such an extent that it becomes, as Pius XII wrote, “a meaningless formula” (24). No Salvation Outside of the Church is a dogma completely incompatible with Modernism, and therefore must be eliminated to make way for what John Paul II called the “invincible guarantee of universal salvation”. (25) Some of the more crafty Modernists will retain the traditional terminology, yet infuse into it a completely different meaning. For example, they will use the word “transubstantiation”, yet their understanding and explanation of the word will be identical to the Lutheran heresy of consubstantiation (26); or they might retain the phrase ‘resurrection of the body’, but then argue that it means “*not* to the resurrection of physical bodies, but of persons”. (27)

Whichever tactic is employed, whether it be an outright rejection of a dogma, or treating the proposition as “a meaningless formula”, or infusing an altogether new meaning into the traditional terminology, the end result is one and the same, namely, a corruption of the Deposit of Faith through the corruption of the articles of faith contained within it - and this applies to each and every article of the faith, “for there is no part of Catholic truth that they leave untouched, none that they do not strive to corrupt” (28)

To counteract this destructive error, Pope St. Pius X included the following phrase in his *Oath Against Modernism*, which he required all priests,

seminarians, and seminary professors to take annually, and which remained in force until the New Springtime arrived in July, 1967. The section reads:

“Fourthly, I sincerely hold that the doctrine of faith was handed down to us from the apostles through the orthodox Fathers in exactly the same meaning and always in the same purport. Therefore, I entirely reject the heretical misrepresentation that dogmas evolve and change from one meaning to another different from the one which the Church held previously. I also condemn every error according to which, in place of the divine deposit which has been given to the spouse of Christ to be carefully guarded by her, there is put a philosophical figment or product of a human conscience that has gradually been developed by human effort and will continue to develop indefinitely”.

**Cause of Modernism:** St. Pius X lists three causes of Modernism, namely, pride, curiosity and ignorance. He wrote: “It is pride which puffs them up with that vainglory which allows them to regard themselves as the sole possessors of knowledge, and makes them say, elated and inflated with presumption, ‘We are not as the rest of men’.” He said that curiosity, if not regulated by prudence “suffices to account for all errors”, and leads to the “spirit of novelty”, which has always been the mark of heresy. But the proximate cause of Modernism, according to the Pope, “consists in a perversion of the mind” and ignorance.

“[T]he intellectual cause of Modernism ... and the chief one, is ignorance. Yes, these very Modernists who seek to be esteemed as Doctors of the Church, who speak so loftily of modern philosophy and show such contempt for scholasticism, have embraced the one with all its false glamour, precisely because their ignorance of the other has left them without the means of being able to recognize confusion of thought and to refute sophistry. Their whole system, containing as it does errors so many and so great, has been born of the union between faith and false philosophy”. (29)

**Conclusion:** Modernism is more than a heresy. Heresy denies one or more dogmas of the Catholic Faith. Modernism undermines all dogma by denying the immutable nature of truth itself. Modernism is truly a new religion – the religion of man. In this religion, vital immanence – “the divine within” - puts man in the place of God; the “religious sense”, which is produced by the “divine within”, replaces the virtue of faith; while the ever-evolving “general consciousness” constitutes the equivalent of the deposit of faith. In this

religion of man, everything is turned upside down: God did not become man through the Incarnation; instead, man is becoming God through the process of evolution. In this inverted religion, the true God is rejected, and all things are “ordained to man as to their center and summit”. May the good God preserve us from these monstrous errors, “which ought not to seduce clear thinking minds”, and may our Lady of Fatima pray for us. Amen.

Footnotes:

- 1) Pascendi, 3
- 2) Pius XII Allocution *Si Diligis*, 1954
- 3) First Vatican Council
- 4) *Lamentabili* # 21
- 5) *Satis Cognitum*
- 6) See Dialogue of Catherin of Siena, pg 126
- 7) Catholic Encyclopedia
- 8) Pascendi, 7
- 9) *Ibid*, 10
- 10) *Ibid*, 7
- 11) *Ibid*, 7
- 12) *Ibid*, 8
- 13) *Ibid*, 8
- 14) 100 years of Modernism pg. 85
- 15) Pascendi, 11
- 16) *Ibid*, 14
- 17) John Paul II, Angelus Address, Oct. 12, 1986:
- 18) 100 years of Modernism pg. 85
- 19) Pascendi, 15
- 20) *Ibid*, 13
- 21) First Vatican Council
- 22) *Ibid*
- 23) The true notion of Tradition, January 1997 issue of *Si Si No No*
- 24) “Some reduce to a meaningless formula the necessity of belonging to the true Church in order to gain eternal salvation”. (*Humani Generis*)
- 25) <http://www.waragainstbeing.com/parti-article6>
- 26) Message to the Abbes of the Order of the Most Holy Redeemer, September 21, 2002
- 27) “It now becomes clear that the real heart of faith in the resurrection does not consist *at all* in the idea of the restoration of bodies, *to which we have reduced it in our thinking* ( ...) One thing at any rate may be fairly clear: Both John (6:63), and Paul (1 Cor. 15:50) state with all possible emphasis that the ‘resurrection of the flesh’, the ‘resurrection of the body’, is not a resurrection of the physical bodies... To recapitulate, Paul teaches, not the resurrection of eternal physical bodies, but the resurrection of persons, and this not in the return of the ‘flesh body’, that is, the biological structure...” (Introduction to Christianity by Fr. Joseph Ratzinger, pgs 349, 357-58)
- 28) Pascendi, 3
- 29) *Ibid*, 41