

In the mid-1980s when I was at Boston College, one of the lecturers commented that the Catholic Church hierarchy was fearful of a schism in the church. Too late, he remarked, it is already here, informally. He pointed out that the majority of students at that Catholic university no longer believed the traditional story of a heavenly deity who locked people out of heaven because of the first humans' disobedience. He also observed that they no longer attended the Church's liturgy because its imagery and language are steeped in that story.

The Catholic Church hierarchy was indeed fearful. So much so that in 1985-6, Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger assembled a team of twelve cardinals and bishops to produce, in consultation with other bishops, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, promulgated in 1992. This was not just a "catechism". This became a weapon in the hands of bishops around the world. It was used to silence any theologian or speaker who dared to question Christianity's story about a heavenly Deity denying access to Himself and the unique role of the Church for "salvation". There would be no formal schism over doctrine.

There are three key passages in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* that bishops can and have used to silence questioning and, supposedly, to stop the informal schism from spreading:

"The account of the fall in Genesis 3 uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place *at the beginning of the history of man*." (#390)

"The harmony in which they had found themselves is now destroyed: control of the soul's spiritual faculties over the body is destroyed ... Because of man, creation is now subject "to its bondage to decay" ... *Death makes its entrance into human history*." (#400)

"The Church, which has the mind of Christ, knows full well that we cannot tamper with the revelation of original sin without undermining the mystery of Christ." (#389)

It should be noted that the hierarchy chose not to seek advice from Roman Catholic Scripture scholars at the Pontifical Biblical Commission on the usage of Scriptural texts in the Catechism. Scripture scholars later expressed concern about the extensive use of proof texting in the Catechism to end all discussion on issues. In 1996, Cardinal Ratzinger publicly acknowledged "the particularly strong attacks directed against the use of Scripture" in the Catechism but dismissed the scholarship as "hypotheses".

Theologians, religious educators and speakers have no comeback when a bishop armed with the Catechism bans them in his diocese if they question its content. This is particularly so if they question its insistence that contemporary understanding of Jesus as saviour of the world story must be understood in the context of an original human sin. The Catechism has been and, remains, a very effective weapon against intelligent and honest questioning of the traditional redemption story.

Unfortunately for the hierarchy's efforts to stem disbelief, the Hubble telescope was launched in 1990.

Someday, the Hubble telescope will be acknowledged for its influence in reshaping theological thinking at the end of the twentieth century. Not for theologians alone, but for people in the pews also. Since 1990 there has been an exponential increase in the numbers of the "faithful" who have walked away from belief in religious imagination and thinking that is packaged in a patently outmoded worldview. Many adult Catholics no longer attend the Church's liturgy. Even among those who do attend Mass, the number of people who say they can no longer recite the Creed is significant.

Any Christian believer, theologian or otherwise, attentive to the Hubble images beaming into homes around the world could not fail to see their implications. Those magnificent images demonstrated not only how galaxies, stars and planets emerged but also provided a new perspective for understanding our place in the vast universe. Inevitably, the images lead many discerning Christians to ponder questions about "God", about "everywhere", about revelation, about evolutionary development and about how Jesus now fits in.

Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger, however, were having none of this. In August, 2000, Ratzinger promulgated the most defensive theological document in our lifetime, the Declaration, *Dominus Iesus*.

This document was sent to all the Roman Catholic bishops advising them what must be believed and taught. Included are the following statements:

Only our Scriptures are "divinely inspired"; (#8)

"As an innocent lamb Jesus merited life for us by his blood which he freely shed. (#10)

Jesus and Jesus alone bestows revelation and divine life to humanity (#13)

The Church is the instrument of salvation for all humanity, (#20)

“No one, therefore, can enter into communion with God except through Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit.” (#12)

We can assume that, as with the Catechism, this Declaration was not sent to members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission for scholarly guidance on the use of scriptural texts.

In 1974, Karl Rahner, wrote “If we are honest, we must admit that we are to a terrifying extent a spiritually lifeless Church.” (*The Shape of the Church to Come*, p.82) Today we could add that the Church is not only spiritually lifeless but that it is also theologically lifeless. By continuing to insist as it does, that traditional doctrine is immutable, the Church will remain lifeless. The informal schism will continue. Voices that could bring church belief and practice alive again, as happened in the post-Vatican II era, are kept silent or remain underground.

As long as bishops have the authority to silence sincere progressive thinkers on the grounds of infidelity to Church teaching as enshrined in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the lethargy and lifelessness will persist.

This present time offers an exhilarating opportunity for Christian theology. Encouraging theologians to dialogue and openly explore the theological implications of the “new story” of the universe would immediately breathe new and much-needed energy into theological conversation.

What can be done?

Individually we are powerless. A way ahead, perhaps the only way, is for some collective honesty. We need the voices of influential groups in the Catholic Church, such as theological associations, associations of religious congregations, groups attending synods, and reform groups to summon their collective integrity and courage and to declare publicly: “We do not believe that humanity emerged into a state of paradise. In other words, and in plain English, we dissent from #390 and #400 in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. We respectfully call on the Catholic Church to start the process of bringing its theological thinking into conformity with reality.”

As part of the same strategy, bishops should be called to account and to respond publicly to the question: “Do you really believe that humanity emerged into a state of paradise?” Presently, it is a question that most, if not all bishops, will want to step around and avoid answering. What bishop would want to reveal

that he is either a biblical fundamentalist totally ignorant of both scriptural scholarship and contemporary scientific fact, or that he disagrees with *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*?

Let us get this foundational theological issue out in the open and stop ignoring the elephant in the room. Let us stop adding to the intellectual dishonesty and lifelessness that permeates the Roman Catholic Church today. An exciting theological era awaits if we collectively find the courage to break through the Vatican's defences, stand up to its defensive theological weapons and call for a contemporary reformation of Christian imagination and thinking. Let the groundwork for Vatican 3 begin.