

Preface

To My Fellow “JP2 Catholics”

“WHEN YOU WANT TO get to know a sports car, you’ve got to get inside it, and drive it fast.” This is what R. R. Reno, editor of *First Things*, said to a group of Catholic students who were just beginning their studies at Princeton in the fall of 2012. Reno was using the image of “getting to know a sports car” to illustrate what it means to think critically from within a tradition, as opposed to maintaining an allegedly “neutral” and “academic” distance from the truth claims of an inherited tradition. Only by way of tradition are we equipped with a grammar to think critically about our own tradition and other traditions, Reno was proposing. If you want to think critically about your own tradition, Reno was saying, don’t stand away from it at a “safe,” “objective” distance, as though that’ll enable you to think more critically about it. No, get inside of it, and “drive it fast.”

After the talk, I made a point of speaking with Reno, whom I had already been following as an eager disciple for several years. I told him about my long-standing existential struggle concerning whether to turn “Romeward.” I had just enrolled as an MDiv student at Princeton Theological Seminary, largely on the basis of what Reno had written in the pages of *First Things* about its place in the pantheon of theological “Schools of Thought.” Reno had proposed that Princeton Seminary was the best place to study Protestant dogmatics,¹ and so I went in order to deal with the question of whether to embrace Protestantism or become Catholic. After an engaging chat, the conversation came to a natural close, we exchanged farewells, and I turned for the door. “Jeremiah,” Reno called to me as I was just about to step out onto the porch, facing Mercer

1. Reno, “Schools of Thought,” para. 28.

Street. I turned to look back at him. “Don’t stay in the antechambers of the Church for too long.”

When the First Sunday of Lent came around that spring, I underwent my “first scrutinies” as a part of the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) program in Princeton University’s Catholic chaplaincy. The next morning, as I was eating waffles with my friend Vevian Zaki in the seminary cafeteria, she looked down at her iPhone and said to me with alarm, “The pope is resigning!” I didn’t believe her. Vevian knew how much I loved Benedict.

That Lent was the Lent between two popes, the Lent of my scrutinies, the Lent of farewell to a beloved proclaimer of the gospel at the helm of Peter’s bark. It was likewise the Lent in which the next pope—Francis—won my heart, and there he struck a symphonic chord. From everything I saw and heard, Francis was rocking it as pope, meeting the needs of a besieged global flock.

By the first autumn of his papacy, Francis was already ruffling some feathers among many of my fellow Catholics involved with Princeton’s Catholic chaplaincy, where I had begun serving as coordinator for the “Grad Fellowship” group. While many of my fellow Catholics committed to orthodoxy perceived dissonance in the Francis message, I was hearing something very different, something that came to my ears as music, music in deep harmony with the song I had already learned to love, the song JP2 and Benedict had long been singing.

During Benedict’s papacy, his first volume of *Jesus of Nazareth* captured my imagination, and has since maintained its claim upon my heart. The text is dear to me, as it presented anew to my searching soul the figure of the protagonist of the four Gospels. One of the sections of that volume that continually comes to mind is the chapter in which Cardinal Ratzinger—elected as Successor to Peter in the midst of drafting that very volume—enters into conversation with Rabbi Jacob Neusner,² author of *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*. In Neusner’s book, the rabbi enters into a dialogue with Jesus of Nazareth as he is presented in Matthew’s Gospel.³ In his own book, Pope Benedict in turn joins Rabbi Neusner and Jesus, among the crowds at a mount in Galilee, where Jesus delivers an extensive sermon, popularly known as the Sermon on the Mount. Following

2. Benedict, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 103–22.

3. See Neusner, *Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, 7–11.

the sermon, as Neusner and Jesus make their way down the dusty roads of Palestine toward Jerusalem, the theologian in the shoes of the fisherman—Benedict XVI—comes alongside Jesus and Neusner, joining in on their conversation. Neusner, for his part, expresses his admiration and astonishment at the words of the new teacher from Nazareth.⁴ Yet, he concludes at the end that he cannot follow this compelling rabbi, for his teachings are, he says, a departure from the faith of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel. Ratzinger and Neusner cordially, but decisively, part company: Neusner, on a path more faithful—he firmly believes—to the teachings of Moses, and Ratzinger, for his part, in company with Jesus. Precisely in this following of the rabbi from Galilee, Benedict believes he is following the one whose teaching fulfills the law of Moses and that in this following he is incorporated—as a gentile—into the very family of Abraham.

This conversation between the professor-pope and the professor-rabbi—each in conversation with the carpenter-rabbi—in the pages of *Jesus of Nazareth*, has since served as a model for me. Neusner and Benedict each take seriously the claims of their counterparts, seriously enough to recognize what is distinctive in their respective claims. This is anything but a dialogue built upon the cordiality of relativism. The cordiality is rooted in the mutual desire for truth. My professor Phillip Cary exhorted his students to appropriate postmodern “hospitality” in this very way. That is, we must be hospitable enough to really welcome and orient our conversation partner to our own turf, our own home, with its own distinctive sets of claims, axioms, judgments, and proposals. I hope that in the following pages, I can make a contribution to this style of conversation—a style of engaging in vibrant dialogue with mutual respect rooted in conviction.

In the pages of *Commonweal* magazine, Massimo Faggioli has characterized American Catholicism as the global center of opposition to Pope Francis, and characterized *First Things* as the main intellectual organ of that opposition.⁵ This volume is a response to the *First Things* editor-in-chief, Dr. Reno, whom I’m conceiving of as this book’s primary conversation partner. It’s a student’s first response to the professor in a classroom discussion, as it were. And in his response to the teacher’s lectures, this

4. Benedict, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 114; Neusner, *Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, 155–61.

5. Faggioli, “Whose Rome?,” para. 1.

student zeroes in on what he's identifying as the theological, ethical, and spiritual core of the social message of Francis and the two previous popes. The topic of conversation is the legacy of JP2 and Benedict in the Francis papacy. I call that legacy by a single name—*cosmic chastity*, the meaning of which we'll be exploring throughout the rest of this book.

To get a sense of what I'm after, imagine, if you will, that Reno is teaching a class on "The Church and Society Today." Let's say that a number of Reno's lectures for the class include commentary on Pope Francis in relation to current societal trends and in relation to the teaching of the two previous popes. Imagine that I'm one of Professor Reno's students in the back row, a student who to a great extent is a disciple of Reno the theologian. I conceive of this book as a friendly conversation in which I seek to bring to the attention of those listening in on my rebuttal to Dr. Reno a vision of *Catholic social teaching as an integral whole*, rooted as it is in the Church's theological tradition, in direct opposition to what I'm calling *technocracy's regime of lust*. The vision of Catholic social teaching of which I speak is one with a rich theological inheritance. It has been advocated by JP2, Benedict, and Francis together, each of whom draw upon the heritage of that teaching going back to Leo XIII and beyond into the Church's past—a past of long-standing resistance to lust's tyranny.

What initially won this student over to Reno—what compelled him to follow his lead in thinking theologically and in interpreting the signs of the times—was Reno's compelling way of reading the Bible. Reno's eager back-row student has hung on to every word of Reno's series preface to the *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, as though it were his own personal mandate. Over and against the modern "consensus that classical Christian doctrine distorts interpretive understanding,"⁶ Reno proposed that doctrine is, in truth, "a clarifying agent, an enduring tradition of theological judgments that amplifies the living voice of scripture."⁷ In opposition to the view that "a noncommitted" reading of Scripture is "the way toward objectivity," Reno boldly observed that "an interpretation unprejudiced" simply invites "the languid intellectual apathy that stands aside to make room for the false truisms and easy answers of the age."⁸

Reno is a representative spokesperson for a vibrant, socially engaged Catholicism that roots itself in orthodoxy. With him I see many

6. Reno, series preface to the *Brazos Theological Commentary*, 11.

7. Reno, series preface to the *Brazos Theological Commentary*, 11.

8. Reno, series preface to the *Brazos Theological Commentary*, 11.

conversation partners whom I seek to engage here through my dialogue with him: Raymond de Souza, Ross Douthat, Douglas Farrow, Matthew Schmitz, George Weigel, and Julia Yost among them, each prominent contributors to the intellectual-social formation of North America's core faithful, and each of whom have found themselves in a position to resist forces of liberalization, secularization, and relativism within and outside the Church in what many call the "culture wars." Each of these theologically informed North American Catholic social commentators are a delight to read and to listen to, each in their own distinctive ways. Among these conversation partners, Reno has been the most formative for me, and is therefore the one I have to reckon with the most in my own heart, in discerning a way of moving as a Catholic in the public square today.

My own steps have taken a distinctive turn away from Reno, particularly with respect to a hermeneutics of the Francis message. Whereas Francis is dismissed by Reno as having entered into a peace pact with the liberal elite, he models for me a way of moving boldly as a Catholic in the public square today. Reno's reading of Francis is a reading I regard as false and misdirected. I've become convinced that Francis's lead takes us in the right direction. But that direction is something that Reno hasn't managed to perceive in his reading of Francis. What Francis actually directs us toward is what I seek to explicate in this book. And I'm convinced that we can clearly perceive what Francis is pointing the way toward if we give him a fair and more thorough hearing on his own hermeneutical playing field; or, to switch metaphors, if we give him a more thorough hearing in what I refer to in this book as the *amphitheater of Catholic social teaching* in which Francis sings his song, according to the acoustical structure of that body of the Church's theological teaching to which Francis submits and to which he consistently appeals.

What I put forward in these pages is an introductory presentation of the theology and accompanying ethos and spirituality of cosmic chastity that grounds the body of the Church's social doctrine as it is presented by Francis and the two previous popes. With respect to interpreting the Francis message, this book offers an alternative hermeneutic to the one exemplified by much of Reno's commentary on Francis in the pages of *First Things*. By way of presenting *cosmic chastity* as the singular social message of the JP2, Benedict, and Francis papacies, I place Francis's thinking in close association with that of the two previous popes. This book, then, doesn't primarily argue for a hermeneutic of continuity; it executes and exemplifies a hermeneutic of continuity.

With respect to how to read the signs of the times, this student in the back row of Reno's classroom is fundamentally a disciple of JP2 and Benedict, two of *the* great heralds of the Catholic faith in his lifetime and in the lifetime of his fellow classmates of committed millennial Catholics. The student writing this volume looks to JP2 and B16 as heralds of Catholic orthodoxy, heralds of the glad tidings of Jesus Christ in the contemporary world, as the Moses and Elijah of Catholic social teaching as it pertains to the present moment. These two figures—this student believes—show the way of moving as a Catholic in the public square. The pressing concern of Vatican II—that of the Church's mission in the modern world—was the concern that animated the missionally driven hearts of these two ecclesial giants when they served as young theological advisors at the council, and throughout their subsequent scholarly and pastoral careers. In a decades-long fraternal collaboration, these two dogmatically rooted Vatican II rock stars forged the way for a New Evangelization and lit the fire of a culture of life in the dark night of a culture of death. As collaborative shepherd-intellectuals and formators of a new generation of the core faithful, they were keenly on guard against the ideological wolves that threatened their ecclesial flock, ever prone as this flock was to wander straight into an ideological den of beasts.

My fellow committed Catholic "classmates" and I are largely formed by JP2's robust Marian spirituality, his zeal for evangelization, and his vision of sexual chastity in an age of endemic and systematically fed sexual lust. We are likewise very much children of Benedict's christocentricity, his love for the liturgy, and his commitment to the Word of God. We are especially formed by JP2's and B16's outspoken commitment to orthodoxy and moral truth in a relativistic age. And Francis, according to my portrayal of him in this book, follows very closely in their footsteps. What impresses this back-row student about JP2 and B16 is very much what impresses him about Francis.

By way of this text, I seek to explain what I'm hearing in the message of Francis and the two previous popes. As many faithful North American Catholics look to JP2 and Benedict as allies in their struggles for social and political influence, and as this book presents JP2 and Benedict as allies of Francis's social concerns, the theological rationale of JP2's and Benedict's social teaching will serve—in this text—a mediating function between *Francis* on the one hand and faithful *conservative North American Catholics* on the other. Both Francis and the core faithful of his flock in North America claim an alliance with JP2 and Benedict, but the

relationship between Francis and a significant portion of the core faithful is characterized by tension. Many faithful Catholics perceive Francis as possessing what seem to be undeniable and obvious weaknesses—not just his alleged propensity for doctrinal sloppiness (remarks on airplanes, the “infamous” *AL* footnote, his nonresponse to the *dubia*) but also some of his purportedly preposterous appointments and fellow travelers (e.g., Cardinal Paglia and the JP2 Institute). Though this book is not itself polemical in character, as it does not set out to directly dismantle every suspicion of Francis one by one and explain his every move, it does offer a reckoning with these apparent weaknesses on Francis’s part, and it does so by presenting the theological, ethical, and spiritual heart of the Francis message, in the light of which his words and actions can be thoroughly comprehended and in a way that I think can awaken an enthusiasm and support for Francis on the part of those zealously concerned for the preservation and promulgation of the orthodox faith today. Once we can see Francis in the same theological, ethical, and spiritual space as JP2 and Benedict, it will be easier, I suggest, to see him in relation to the concerns that animate the faithful Catholics who are concerned that Francis is a threat to orthodoxy. My hope is that any JP2 Catholics reading this book can walk away from the text with a sense that the heart of the Francis message is something that they can get behind, something that calls for a serious and much-needed societal conversion. Indeed, it’s my hope that readers will find in Francis, by way of this text, an enlightening guide through the confusing and tumultuous landscape of our day, as I have found him to be in my own life as a millennial Catholic who considers himself a child of JP2 and Benedict.

I would like to identify at the outset an aspect of the papal trio’s social teaching that runs as a red thread throughout this volume’s theological, ethical, and spiritual meditation on the singular message of the three popes, particularly as it manifests itself in the message of Francis. This book harps strongly upon cosmic chastity’s demand upon the human heart to make a definitive gift-of-self according to a theology of creation-as-gift, in direct opposition to the lustful urgings of our consumeristic, relativistic, and technocratic society. That is to say, this book harps upon cosmic chastity’s vision of sexuality, marriage, family, and vocational commitment as part of a larger logic of integral ecology according to a theology of creation-as-gift in thorough opposition to relativism, technocracy, and consumerism. An integral vision of sexuality, marriage, family, and vocation as part of a larger logic of integral ecology is a vision