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## An Opening

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**W**hen I grew up, the Church had all the answers to every conceivable question and the answers were always black and white. We were right and everyone else was wrong. There was no partial truth, no tentative searching, no intellectual modesty — the leadership simply said yes or no, right or wrong, and that was that. Authority was a force to be reckoned with in the Catholic Church. The reckoning was simple: authority commanded and you obeyed; no questions asked; no reasons given; only the statement, "You do it because I say do it; do it or get out."

I am, of course, speaking somewhat in caricature, but certainly not altogether so. If even the state wanted to progress, it had better listen to the Church's advice, since we also had the last word of wisdom to say about political, as well as economic and social reality. If there was evil in these secular worlds of politics, business, or societal life, it was because they were not listening carefully enough to what the Church, the perfect society, was saying. If culture was degenerating, again the Church could give the reason why. Evil books, that is, evil in the Church's judgment, were put on the Index, not to be read by faithful Christians without special permission, even in the university. The Church would tell you what movies to see or not to see as well. Again, these judgments, aesthetic and intellectual, as well as moral, were made peremptorily, finally, with unflinching certitude and enforced rigidly up and down the line. When you said Church, you meant everyone from the Pope to the parish janitor or the head of the Altar and Rosary Society. Everyone's style was the same, from top to bottom: authoritarian, unyielding, righteous, unquestioning, or, if described less lovingly from the outside, cocksure.

This was the salient character of the Church I knew for most of the years of my life, the Church I learned about at home, at school, in the parish, especially in the seminary. It was surely a law-and-order Church. It was growing larger numerically, even if along rigid lines. There was little doubt expressed. What few revolts occurred were dealt with effectively and quickly — out you go. It was peaceful in a way, super-obedient and faithful, easy to govern, and for all of these reasons, triumphalistic in style, mediaeval monarchic in governance, as safe and secure as the gilded government bonds of the time, and about as exciting as a graveyard in its easy victory over the world of the flesh and the devil.

Then came along a man named John who opened the windows to let in the fresh air of modern reality. One can argue whether he really knew what he was doing, but certainly the Holy Spirit knew and Pope John did listen well. Earlier Popes had written beautiful treatises about just wages. John did not write. He just doubled the unjust wages paid everyone at the Vatican. His simple deed spoke louder than all the beautiful words of his predecessors.

By opening Vatican Council II, Pope John, in fact, opened the Church. He also opened it to the other Christian churches which had not even been called churches before. He opened it to non-Christians, even welcomed discussions with non-believers and remarked to Khrushchev's daughter that her son's name was the same as his, and could he pray especially for little Ivan? John opened the Church to freedom of conscience. His Council discarded the ancient chestnut that "error has no rights," since rights inhere in human persons, whether or not in error, and not in abstractions like the notion of error. John opened the Church to great theologians who had been abruptly silenced before. He welcomed new ideas from whatever source, apologized to the Jews for centuries of anti-Semitism, declaring with open arms, "I am Joseph (his baptismal name), your brother." John recognized that, in fact, the world was not waiting with bated breath for every declaration from a triumphalistic Church or pontifical Churchmen. He introduced modernity, in a word, openness.

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In a very real sense, after John XXIII died, Pope Paul VI has had to pick up the pieces, to restore some semblance of order to the Church through which the winds of change, pent up for almost five centuries, had been blowing with hurricane force during Pope John's brief pontificate. It is unfortunately, but inevitably the quite unfair task for our age to try to assimilate in a decade or two, the whole world of change that should have been taking place slowly, gradually, and organically, over the past five centuries.

I suspect that central to our problem today is that the leadership of the Church was formed, trained, and accustomed to govern the safe, sane, and secure Church of pre-Vatican Council II. Methods of governance that were perfect then are disastrous now. Attitudes, mind-sets, frames of reference, modes of thought and discourse that worked well then, a short time ago, do not work at all today, in fact, are often counterproductive. Habits born of centuries of sailing in halcyon waters do not prepare either the officers or the crew to sail through a sudden and unexpected hurricane with gale-force winds and mountainous waves. Every normal action now must become an unprecedented improvisation. I am somewhat reminded of the world revolution we encountered in the university world in the late sixties. One day I called President George Beadle of the University of Chicago to ask him how he had managed to survive a sudden ten-day crisis. He answered, "Every morning I asked myself, what is the worse thing I can do today, and I didn't do it." This is called negative wisdom, but it is much needed today.

The difference between the universities and the Church is that in the universities, the leadership was largely swept out when hard times came, and the leaders were replaced by those who had proved themselves adept at crisis management, mostly younger men. In the Church, the leadership is practically for life.

If the officers of Peter's Bark are having trouble, you can be sure that the crew is troubled, too. Never before in the Church's long history have so many of the officers and crew jumped ship. Again, one must try to understand and to be compassionate, even while welcoming and applauding the changes that caused all this insecurity. The pre-Vatican II Church, as described above, was so highly structured, so authoritarian and secure, that one could literally lean on the walls and the walls would support all who leaned. There were many who leaned, rather than stand on their own two feet. When authority was first questioned, and showed its feet of clay, when the secure walls began to shake and some of them fell, many people who were leaning on those walls fell with them.

People used to total support, total security, absolute answers to everything, find it hard, if not impossible, to survive in a growing atmosphere of insecurity, reasonable doubt, questioning, and openness. Every crisis, every cataclysmic change has its predictable casualties — those who cannot change, who cannot adjust to the new reality. We all have to regret this in the Church, but we also have to recognize that the crisis had to come sooner or later, and the hour was already very late for the inevitable change. Now that it has happened, we must do all we can to help those who were hurt, who still cannot understand, but that is not a reason for turning back the clock for attempting to reverse the normal flow of history, even in the Church.

If kindness and understanding for former bishops, priests, nuns, and disaffected Catholics is part of the price we pay, it is even more a demand of simple Christian charity in our times. Love for our brethren and sisters needs no justification or explanation. We need to grant understanding and love as well to those at both ends of the spectrum within the Church, those ultra-conservatives who cannot live comfortably with the changes, and those ultra liberals who want to change everything that is yet unchanged, whether or not it is good or proper or even useful to change it. Both groups should, I believe, be lived with in whatever peace can be managed during this necessarily interim period.

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