

“THE AGE OF CHRISTENDOM”: MEDIEVAL COUNCILS AND DOCTRINAL CLARITY

After a three-month hiatus, I am resuming my series of articles on the Ecumenical Councils. We pick up with **Lateran Council II**, held in **1139 A.D.** Mind you, just 16 years had passed since Lateran I, making this the **shortest period** between two councils in the history of the Church. While neither counted among the Church’s most important councils, nor even necessarily considered ecumenical at the time it was held (but only later), I do believe that it provides **timely lessons** for the contemporary Church. An Italian named **Arnaldo da Brescia** (Arnold of Brescia) had called out corruption in the Church. Make no mistake, he was a **radical reformer**. He spoke against clerical wealth (so far, so good in my book), but went on to attack the very idea of **property ownership** by the Church and rejected the temporal powers of the Pope. That was a **bridge too far**, and the Council was called in part to address his excesses.

Like many reformers, there was a kernel of truth in Arnaldo’s criticism. He was later reconciled to the Church, only to fall away again. A Church too concentrated on acquiring **temporal goods** will always be in peril with respect to its mission. Today, this is much less of a problem—certainly in most dioceses with which I am familiar. “Shoestring budget” comes to mind for most. Still, Vatican lay and clerical officials are **facing the music** in a high-profile trial that resumes in October. It is incredibly opaque and complicated, yet sloppy practices (if not criminal?) affect laity and clergy alike because we want our donations to be managed carefully and in accordance with our intentions. Many **questions remain** about Vatican investments of funds, including some received as charitable donations.

This was the age of Western Christendom—large swaths of territory were united socially, politically, and religiously. Lateran II addressed “hot button” issues of the day without fear or compromise. **Canon 9** was pointedly aimed at religious who took on additional “duties,” in this case for profit! It excoriated those who “after receiving the habit and making their profession, are learning **civil law** and **medicine** with a view to temporal gain, in **scornful disregard** of the rules of their blessed teachers Benedict and Augustine.” Ouch! Later, since “ecclesiastical honors depend not on blood-relationships but on merit,” **Canon 16** prohibits, “by apostolic authority, anyone to **exercise a claim** over or to demand, by **hereditary right**, churches, prebends, provostships, chaplaincies or any ecclesiastical offices.” Occasionally, I receive innocent questions that reveal a lack of understanding of how we envision our own priestly ministry.

Case in point—“And Father, what is your **fee** for performing a wedding?” Yikes, my fee? “Well, actually, my fee is \$0.00. We do not charge for the sacraments.” This is not a new concern. **Canon 24** reads: “We also prescribe that no sale-price is to be demanded for chrism, holy oil and burials.” Obviously, it is fair for a Church to have a comprehensive wedding prep fee that includes musicians, liturgy guides, staff time, etc. But **no priest** should charge a “fee” for a sacrament—period! **Ever!** It’s a clerical no-brainer, yet history reminds us that such canons were implemented because **there was a need!** Think we live in a violent age? Consider the Council’s take on a popular pastime of its day. **Canon 14**: “We condemn absolutely those detestable **jousts or tournaments** in which the knights usually come together by agreement and, to make a show of their strength and boldness, rashly engage in contests which are frequently the cause of death to men and of danger to souls.” UFC, 12th century style!

Every age has its challenges; if we arrogantly presume that **only our age** is off course, then we haven’t been paying attention. Don’t fall into that **trap**, because wherever **flawed** human beings

are involved, we could fall prey to a temptation to excess. This is precisely why the Church needs **reform in every age**. It is facile to long for **halcyon days** of an age that almost assuredly did not exist in the same manner we conceive it. The study of the Church's councils must neither become an occasion to grow cynical or **become** jaded in our appraisal of the Church. She remains the Bride of Christ, even despite her festering wounds.

Lateran II is also significant for its treatment of **clerical continence and celibacy**. Referencing that the "law of continence and the purity pleasing to God might be propagated among ecclesiastical persons and those in holy orders," it **reaffirmed** clerical celibacy, even as it tacitly acknowledges that the observance of celibacy in the West was not uniformly observed. The Council moved it a huge step towards universal adherence. Understandably, new legislation didn't turn on a dime in an era before the advent of modern communication. Lateran II declared that **marriages contracted** subsequent to priestly ordination weren't merely prohibited, but **non-existent** (...*matrimonium non esse censemus*). A married clergy in the West was over. The Church began to assert even more doctrinal clarity, as we shall soon see. (To be continued)

- **Mixed signals?** While the Catholic Health Organization favors mandating Covid vaccines, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (note of 21 Dec. 2020) holds that "practical reason makes evident that vaccination is not, as a rule, a moral obligation." If not "as a rule" an **obligation**, then how could a **mandate** be imposed? I had no moral qualms about receiving a vaccine, though I respect the views of those who differ.
- **Bullies** never win. One of my strongest homilies ever focused on now-resigned **Gov. Andrew Cuomo's** brash and inexcusable decision to light up One World Trade Center on Jan. 22, 2019 with pink lights to "celebrate" his abortion expansion law. At the time, the Church missed a **golden opportunity** to **stand up** to a bully, drawing a line in the sand in defense of the most innocent among us.
- I am **most ably** assisted in the daily operations of the Cathedral parish by a lay Parish Administrator, a **standard practice** in the U.S. Catholic Church today. A proposal by the Archbishop of Lima (Peru) to name laity as "pastor" is as thoroughly **misguided** as it is **unnecessary**. He said, "we have to think of more egalitarian ways, closer to the people..." This will only cause **confusion**, when it is clerical/lay **collaboration** that is most needed.
- We have rescheduled our **Ice Cream Social** for Sunday, September 12, the weekend after Labor Day. In the meantime, we still invite you to sign up for **Synod Small Groups** by visiting the Welcome Desk, located in the back of Church by the BVM Chapel.
- I thoroughly enjoyed watching videos ([click here](#)) of four zealous young **Dominican Friars** making a pilgrimage in England in honor of the **800th anniversary** of St. Dominic's death, starting at Ramsgate on Aug. 1 and arriving in Oxford on Aug. 15. Young people are helping us recover the sense of Catholic pilgrimage and the pride we ought to take in being Catholic. Bravo!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector