An allegorical figure of theology by Raphael in 1511, seen at the Vatican Museums (Wikimedia Commons/Darafsh)

by Massimo Faggioli

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @MassimoFaggioli

Join the Conversation

June 7, 2019

Editor's note: *Following is the transcript of a June 7 talk given by Massimo Faggioli at the annual conference of the Catholic Theological Society of America held in Pittsburgh.*

Institutional Church and Academic Theology in a Time of Catholic Disruption

1. The church in a time of disruption

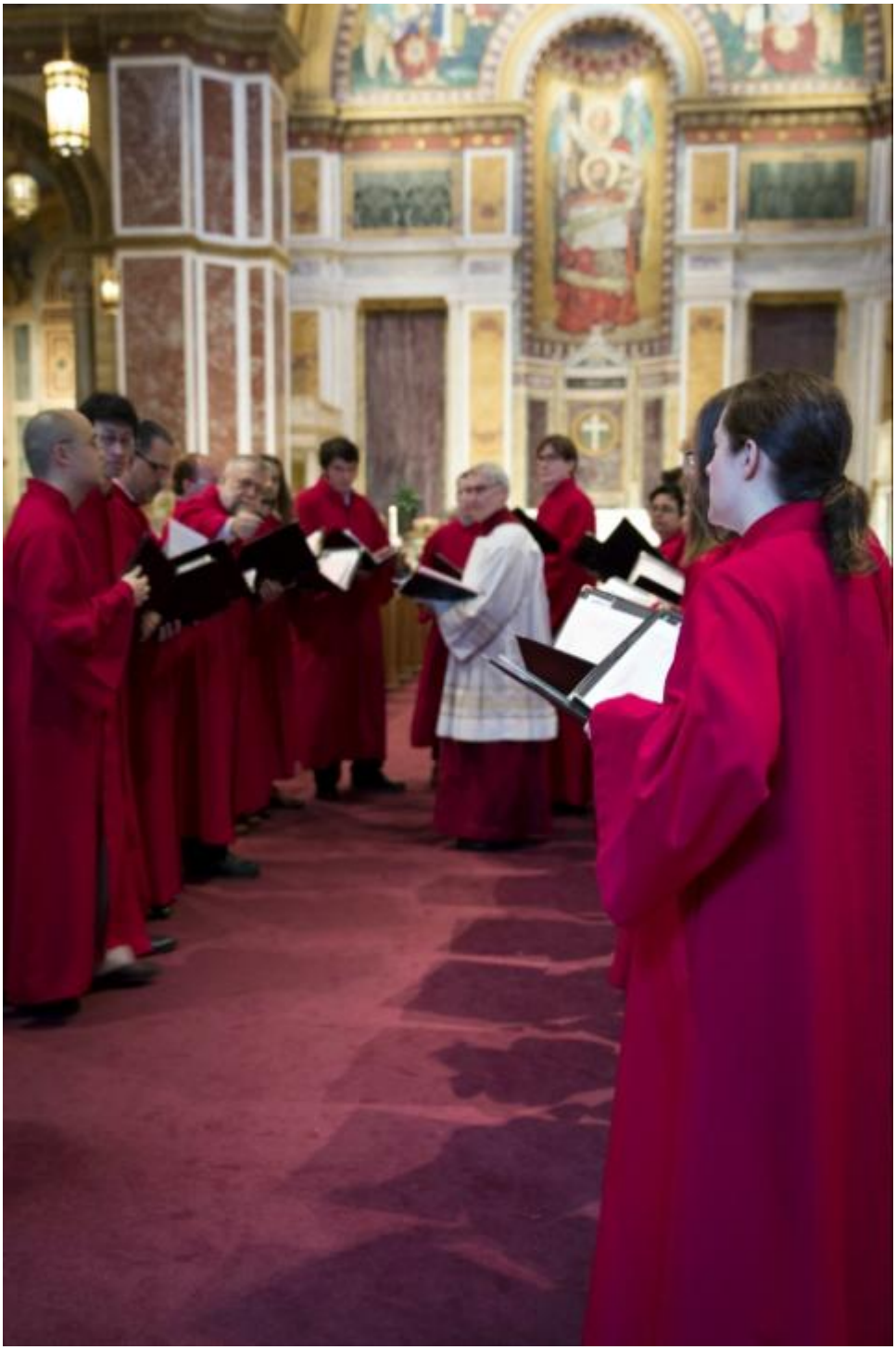
Once, Catholicism was a synonym for status quo; now, it could be disruption. The institutional church is not exempt from the crisis that is affecting all institutions today: a social and political crisis, in part a response to growing inequality, which in many countries has brought to power parties and political leaders harboring xenophobic if not racist sentiments; a crisis of globalization in terms of a redefinition of international political alliances and alignments; a cultural and intellectual disruption where the emergence of a social-media-driven public discourse shapes a redefinition of the role of knowledge and scholarship, together with the crisis of authority of cultural institutions and education.

There is also a particular intra-Catholic disruption. The most visible phenomenon is the politicization of the theological rifts, that is, the identification between theological rifts and different political parties around some key issues that cement political and theological cultures in binary terms, resulting in a mutual quasi-excommunication between Catholics — political excommunication and sacramental excommunication. Largely overlapping with this political polarization, there is an "extremization" around the role of Vatican II in the church today: By extremization, I mean here the opposite of radicalization. Etymologically, radicalization means a return to the core, to the radix, and usually a shedding of culturally laden encrustations. Extremization is an identification of one particular, and secondary, set of allegedly "traditional" or "progressive" teachings on social issues with the very essence of Catholicism and, then, the elevation of these issues in extreme ways as a

supposedly existential threat against the church, ignoring the vast historical and geographical complexities of global Catholicism.

On one side, there is an extremization of the reactions against the alleged "liberalism" of Vatican II with the return of a theological traditionalism that is hardly different from the schismatic interpretation of Vatican II by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and the Society of St. Pius X, SSPX. In this respect, it is worth noting that lately highly respected institutions of higher education, such as Harvard and Notre Dame, have become the stage for the launch of a new Catholic integralism. There is a genetic modification within American Catholic conservatism going on that would deserve much more attention from scholars of theology — and not just journalists or politicians.

On the other side, there is also an extremization of the disappointments with Vatican II and the post-Vatican II church in light of the sexual abuse crisis: The recent debate about the option of leaving or staying in the church has to do with the scandal, but also interjects and complicates an historiographical debate on the recent past of church history, especially the history of the post-Vatican II period.



Members of the Schola Cantorum sing Gregorian chant in the center aisle at the beginning of a Latin Mass Oct. 8, 2018, at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington. (CNS/Chaz Muth)

The fault line about Vatican II is dividing Catholics in their pews and parishes in many different ways, one of the most prominent being the divide around the

liturgical reform. This phenomenon seems to be stronger than anywhere else in Anglo-American Catholicism, where the preference for the Latin Mass is often associated with a particular set of strongly held political and theological opinions.

The Catholic disruption has accelerated in the last decade, thanks in part to the pontificate of Benedict XVI beginning in 2005 and the change of pontificate with Francis in 2013, especially in the USA and the North Atlantic hemisphere. This situation has produced in the Catholic Church a series of attempts, coordinated between conservative factions in the USA and Rome, to undermine Francis' papacy since the late spring and summer of 2013 — up to the point of flirting with schism in August-September 2018. More than two dozen U.S. bishops went on the record in those days to say that they trusted the "Viganò testimony," in which the former nuncio to the USA accused Francis of being part of a vast conspiracy and asked him to resign.

The new wave of the sex abuse crisis that started in 2018, with the direct involvement of bishops and cardinals guilty of cover-ups, but also of sexual abuses themselves (Theodore McCarrick, George Pell), is merely the accelerator of a much deeper and more ramified ecclesial disruption. All this speaks of a vertical collapse of the hierarchical authority of the institutional church — the bishops, the clergy and the Vatican. But this is a problem also for the intellectual authority of Catholic academia and academic theology.

2. Shifting mutual relations between academic theology and the institutional Catholic Church

Ecclesiology is turning into ecclesiodicy: the pressure, in light of the daily news feed of financial and sexual scandals, to justify or to find for the church the reasons to exist as a historic organization instituted by Christ. Because it is clear that the institutional Catholic Church cannot continue to do business as usual in the future.

I think the same should be said for academic theology. I suspect that the situation of mutual estrangement and alienation between the institutional Catholic Church and theology, in the long run, will endanger theology more than the institutional church.

On the one hand, the present disruption means that the relations between academic theology and ecclesial institutions are no longer the same as in the early post-Vatican II period (Paul VI), and not even the same as in the second Vatican II period (John Paul II and Benedict XVI). I often wonder if my relationship with the institutional

church is not driven by my rejection of the bishops trying to dictate to me how we should vote (in Italy: I have a green card), more than by a healthy *sensus ecclesiae* that helps me look at the real people of the church without being pointed in the wrong direction by its hierarchical leadership.

On the other hand, there is also a crisis of authority within academic theology: Maybe less publicized, it is a crisis not less serious than the one afflicting the institutional church. It is the result of different and coexisting pressures: the commodification and the technocratic paradigm in higher education; the collapse of institutional curricular support, students' interest and publication subsidies in the humanities; the erosion of Catholicism at the popular level; lately, the rejection of the theological establishment by the strange mix between populism and neotraditionalism that is part of the church today.

These forces will not go away soon — and when they go away, they will have done considerable damage to the academic-theological establishment, in the sense of the role of departments of theology and religious studies, but also damage to the moral and intellectual standing of our disciplines in the world. The current disruption will affect both the institutional church and academic theology, but in very different ways. The institutional church has resources (financial, political, symbolical) to survive this disruption that academic theology simply does not have. The crisis of theology and religious studies in academia does *not* affect the seminaries to the same degree: hence a growing clericalization of the theology that runs in the veins of the institutional church, which will be more and more driven by concerns and worldviews that are not just different, if not actually opposed, but also in a position of financial and systemic advantage in the competition with academic theologians.

The current disruption also translates into a movement of militant or energized Catholics regrouping around the fortress — the existing institutional church or another fortress to be built, once the ongoing traditionalist, neo-Donatist, and neo-Pelagian rage gets rid of the remaining allegedly "liberal" bishops and of the intellectual liberal elite. This must be seen in the context of the fight for the future of Catholicism where the reconquest of the institutional church is seen as a goal by what I will call here, for lack of a better term, the anti-Vatican II agenda. There is in the Catholic Church a neo-traditionalist revanche that sees not just Pope Francis but

also Vatican II, and the achievements of Catholic theology since Vatican II, as something to be eliminated. Academic Catholic theology in dialogue with the secular world, with other churches, and other religions is a prime target.

But even setting aside for a moment the ongoing fight for the soul of Catholicism waged by the neotraditionalist, anti-Vatican II revanche, it is clear in my experience that the people who want to study Catholic theology are those who really want to be Catholic, and want to see in the theology programs something more openly Catholic *in the sense of ecclesial*. Granted some exceptions, most other students tend to be either bored by theology or baffled by it.

The price for ignoring these movements may well be that theology will return to what it was until a few decades ago: the preserve of a self-interested and self-absorbed clerical clique — only, now with very few ordained clerics in its ranks and with no support from the institutional Catholic Church. Academic Catholic theologians and academic theologians working in Catholic institutions need to disabuse themselves from a few misapprehensions: The neotraditionalist revanche is part of the "*revanche de Dieu*" and it will not go away anytime soon. What many Catholic students want today is a more intentionally Catholic study of theology.

Students wait in line outside the Basilica of the Sacred Heart on the campus of the University of Notre Dame in 2015. (CNS/University of Notre Dame/Barbara Johnston)

Let me be clear here. The detachment of academic theology from the control of the institutional church was one of the most important achievements in the post-Vatican II church because it gave freedom to intellectual inquiry. There is no rolling back from the Land O'Lakes statement and what it meant for theological academia.

What I want to say to other academic theologians is that I do *not* want Catholic academic theology to become catechesis or the voice of the institutional church or go back to old neo-Scholastic apologetics. But I think it will have to become more "ecclesial" in the sense of more aware of the expectations of Catholics today, especially the young generation. In this sense, the current pattern of detachment of academic Catholic theology from the fate of the institutional church is in the long run unsustainable: There is no detachment from the institutional church that does not entail also some detachment from the real people of God. In this, there is, I believe, one of the missed opportunities that Pope Francis' pontificate represents for academic theologians.

This is clearly also a challenge to the institutional church and the bishops: There is no estrangement of the hierarchical leadership of the church from theology that is not also a statement about the estrangement of bishops and their seminaries from the broad intellectual conversation.

3. Academic theology and the sex abuse crisis

The detachment of Catholic academia from the institutional church is unsustainable also for another reason and has to do with a major cause of disruption for the church: the sex abuse crisis.

Among the long-term effects of the abuse crisis, there is, theologically, the temptation of militant Catholics to return to a new monocultural universalism — a return to the Gregorian reform in the 11th century or the Counter Reformation in the 16th century. Institutionally, the crisis will have a disproportionate impact on different kinds of Catholics, accelerating the exodus of disenchanted Catholics and the circling of the wagons of more clerical- and tradition-minded Catholics around an institution seen as under attack.

But there is more that academic theology has to ponder today. The sex abuse crisis has been (rather, *still is*) a massive game of denial in the clerical ranks in the church. It was a systemic crisis caused by abusive priests and by a catastrophic failure of the episcopal hierarchy in dealing with them. The focus on the legal and moral responsibility for the sexual abuses has been almost exclusively on the institutional clerical church. The mutual estrangement between academic theology and the institutional church, and the fact that the vast majority of academic theologians are now lay men and women, allowed academia to keep a certain public detachment from the abuse crisis.

But this is a *Catholic* abuse crisis, not just a clerical abuse crisis. It is not just a legal crisis, but also a *theological* crisis. Thus, I wonder whether we will have to talk, at some point, about the responsibilities of academia (myself first of all) in terms of much-delayed action and intellectual failure in the sexual abuse crisis. It is worth asking if there has been any complacency among the intellectual elites of the church in the disastrous misrecognition of the abuse crisis as a theological crisis. I personally started to pay attention much later than I should have.

A panel in an exhibit at the Catholic University of America in Washington April 24 tells an abuse survivor's story. (CNS/Bob Roller)

I have asked myself many times: Is there anything academic theologians could do to shape a reaction to the crisis different from the one we have seen in the last year? I wonder whether academic theology has been or is playing a game of denial: denial about the role of academic theology in higher education and in the ecclesial turmoil, but also in denial about the sex abuse crisis itself.

This is not to say that theologians have done nothing about the abuse crisis. There is available and fine literature of some individual scholars. But the fact is that there has been so far no systemic, organized and coordinated effort by Catholic theologians to think about the sexual abuse crisis. What became public at least since 2002 could and should have sparked a vast theological rethinking, in a way similar to when new sources became available to tackle key intellectual issues for the life of the church. What I know is that there is no one center or institute dedicated to an inquiry into the root causes and consequences of the abuse crisis on Catholic theology. Some Catholic universities took action or promised to take action lately, only after the storm of 2018.

If Catholic theology fails to do so, then maybe technocrats are right when they say that Catholic theology in the academia is a relic of the past, now merely protecting old privileges, and deserves to die or at least to be marginalized in higher education today. Public debates and high-profile lectures are a supplement to and a consequence of the journalistic work on the abuse crisis, not a substitute: Public panels will not be able to change the terms of the conversation and to add an intellectual contribution to it — which is something that academic theology must be able to provide.

Conclusion

This is a personal mea culpa more than a "*J'accuse*." It is most of all an invitation to take my share of the responsibility in the disruption of the institutional church. The situation of disruption now in plain sight makes clear to me that both the institutional church and academic Catholic theology are facing huge challenges, not only from a business point of view: What are the future prospects of academic theology in a deeply uncertain future for the Catholic Church? But the challenges are

also in terms of mission: What is the role of academic theology in this situation?

As an Italian academic who came to the USA in 2008 after spending long periods of research and work in other countries, I am aware that the problem of the role of academic theology in the Catholic disruption is everywhere. I also think it has particular features in the USA. The network of Catholic institutions of higher education in the USA has no parallel in the world. This means also a particular responsibility of Catholic theologians in the USA *and* non-Catholic theologians working in Catholic colleges and universities in the USA.

As a church historian, I am not blind to the structural reasons that led to the present relationship between theologians and leadership of the institutional church, especially in the USA. However, now it is worth asking if the mutual detachment and estrangement between academic theology and the institutional church is sustainable and responsible.

For what can we, as academic theologians, possibly do? It is my wish that we begin as soon as possible a deep rethinking of what it means to be academic Catholic theologians in this situation of ecclesial disruption. Because it is not going to go away anytime soon and academic theology will not be spared.

[Massimo Faggioli is a professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Villanova University.]