An Irish theologian looks back at tumultuous change in the Church

The grace of change: on his ninetieth birthday, an Irish theologian looks back at tumultuous change in the Church

Looking back over my theological life has been a thought-provoking and sometimes humbling experience. At the conclusion of my primary studies for the priesthood in the late 1940s and early 1950s, I was regrettably incurious about what was going on in the wider theological world – beyond the then mandatory narrow and legalistic scholasticism. I recall standing in St Peter's Square in Rome in 1950 listening to Pope Pius XII define the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary. At the time, I was riveted by the thought that I was present at the declaration of an infallible statement – a tribute to my teachers, if a disconcerting reflection on my state of mind at that time.

I could not have anticipated the earthquake that was to come. The Second Vatican Council, which began in 1962, was to lead to changes in the Church unparalleled in scope and impact since the Council of Trent. I have been fortunate to have lived through a period of extraordinary theological excitement and tumult. Because of their aptness in our present context, I will quote the well-known words of John Henry Newman: "In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often."

The brilliance of this remark lies in the way Newman writes of "the higher world" being different from this one, without contrasting the two in a way that would be unfavourable to this world – what we might call a "vale of tears" theology. "Here below", the perfection of the higher world is mirrored in the changes through which that perfection is reached.

Many of those Catholics who lived during the four sessions of the Council experienced not only a bounty of exciting reforms, but the glowing hope of more to come. There is, however, a battery of traditionalist Catholics who have pledged themselves to oppose this hope. In my view, they must be vigorously resisted as a Christian duty. There are many of them in the Roman Curia, and they are often hostile – sometimes openly, sometimes more stealthily – to Pope Francis and his programme of implementing the reforms intended by the Council.

In 1946, as a raw 19-year-old seminarian, I was sent to Rome to study philosophy and theology at the Gregorian University. I had grown up in an Ireland where the culture was suffused by Catholicism, and where the bishops exercised exorbitant influence in the state. Most Catholics went to Mass every Sunday. The churches were full, clergy were abundant and it seemed as if every family had a son in training for the priesthood or a daughter thinking about the religious life. In Rome I was taught for five

years a theology that endorsed and supported, at an intellectually exalted level, the triumphalist simplicities of my home country.

This theology was largely uncritical. It simply evaded the rigours of contending with Enlightenment ideas. It sharply disapproved of "the turn to the subject" that marked so much philosophy and theology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Immanuel Kant was its bête noir. I remember being warned about the dangers of Kant long before I had opened any of his books. The professors at the Gregorian were highly qualified Jesuits who, on the whole, kept out of trouble with the guardians of orthodoxy, unlike their confrères at the Biblical Institute, a stone's throw away, who were boldly trying to teach a critical approach to biblical studies in spite of constant strafing by the Holy Office.

One of my basic courses, on Revelation, was taught by the distinguished Dutch theologian, Sebastian Tromp, who had been responsible for drafting Pope Pius XII's celebrated 1943 encyclical on the Church as the mystical Body of Christ, Mystici Corporis. Tromp was, of course, a scholastic, though one of more than usual breadth of mind. I was impressed by his authority and his fluent, confident teaching.

Then, to general astonishment, in 1959 Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council; thereby, as unintended collateral damage, sounding the death knell of Tromp's resplendent career. He became Cardinal Ottaviani's theological adviser at the Council, and a major force in the conservative minority. His preparatory documents – or schemata – were rudely shelved by the Council Fathers. His sudden fall was a tragedy in the sense that it was precisely his merits as a great scholastic that now made him irrelevant as a contemporary theologian. Thomism, of course, remains a great theology, but is no longer mandatory for orthodox Catholics. It can now be studied as the great thirteenth-century theology that it was, rather than as the sole measure of Catholic orthodoxy that it had become.

After finishing my studies in Rome, I was sent to Oxford University to read history, with a view to teaching in a new Augustinian school in Carlisle. The three years I spent in Oxford were among the most intellectually stimulating of my life. Rome had taught me what to think; Oxford taught me how to think. I was encouraged to experiment with ideas – which, for me at least, was a refreshing experience. Around the close of the 1960s, Michael Hurley SJ, a pioneering Irish ecumenist, found himself with far greater freedom to pursue his interests in church unity. He invited me to share in his founding of the Irish School of Ecumenics. I also continued to lecture at the Milltown Institute until I was invited to join the staff of the School of Hebrew, Biblical and Theological Studies in Trinity College Dublin. I taught there from 1975 there until my retirement in 2002.

Between the ruthless condemnation of Modernism in 1907 and the opening of the Vatican Council in 1962, "Modernism" had become the principal weapon in Rome's arsenal of condemnatory words; indeed it subsumed many earlier doctrinal offences. Intrigued by what I thought must have been a sensationally dangerous movement to have earned such fevered opprobrium, I became curious and began to research it in depth.

What I discovered was a small group of theologians, philosophers and scripture scholars who had been condemned simply for not being dedicated scholastics. Pope Pius X, in his 1907 encyclical, Pascendi Dominici Gregis, called Modernism the "meeting-place of all the heresies" – which is one of the silliest and most unjust judgements ever made about a responsible group of scholars by their fellow

Catholics. It is sobering to recall that Pius X was canonised in May 1954.

In 1980 I published a book, Transcendence and Immanence (Oxford University Press), which examined the scholarship and inner life of most of the chief Modernists. Modernism became a paramount influence on my critical studies, my spiritual life and on my view of the institutional church. I passed from theological childhood to adulthood in faith as a result of my study of the work of George Tyrrell, Friedrich von Hügel and other Modernist theologians, inspired by their learning, their courage and their integrity.

Heavily censored, unjustly condemned and dismissed from the Jesuits at the express command of Pius X, Tyrrell died in 1909 when anti-Modernism was reaching its peak. In making Tyrrell an outlaw, the English Catholic Church lost a spiritual master. Anti-Modernism was a harsh, totally unnecessary ecclesiastical climate. It dominated theology in my student years, when there was a reliance on abstraction and a fear of immanence (interior experience).

Von Hügel and Tyrrell adopted a line of thought going back to Newman and Coleridge, which avoided the prevailing rationalism of neo-scholasticism. But no alternative to neo-scholasticism was tolerated. In France, there was an alternative which went back to Blaise Pascal and concentrated on the fait intérieure . This was very different to what Tyrrell called “the extrinsicism” of neo-scholasticism. Lucien Laberthonnière was its most distinguished Modernist exponent.

Von Hügel, a centrally important figure in the Modernist movement, became a valued spiritual guide. In a letter to Wilfrid Ward he wrote that there are two classes of theological mind, the first “the mystical and positive”; the second “the scholastic and theoretical”. According to the mystical view, we do not meet God in the arguments and logical moves of scholastic rationalism where, as the French theologian Maurice Blondel put it, people “see too clearly to see properly”. According to von Hügel, the real, absolute, transcendent God is experienced directly but dimly (a very important word in von Hügel’s religious vocabulary: today it might be rendered “in soft focus”). He regarded academic theology as necessary “border-work”, from which the theologian can retire from time to time into a home of peace and light where he – sexist language was unchallenged at that time – gains the strength and fortitude to face the border-work again. He wrote to his niece: “Religion is dim – in the religious temper there should be a great simplicity, and a certain contentment in dimness. It is a great gift of God to have this temper.”

I am near the end of a long and, for the most part, fulfilled life. The institutional Church, in spite of the revival of the spirit of reform under Pope Francis, remains for me in many ways an alienating force. It insists that homosexuality is “intrinsically disordered” and homosexual relationships morally wrong, that women cannot be ordained, that contraception is sinful, that priests must be celibate … even discussion in the Church of these pressing questions is suffocated. Instead, there are only negative dictats from on high, or a passive-aggressive evasion from reforming ideas. I have lived in hope that some, if not all, of such matters might be addressed during my lifetime. It would be pushing hope a little too far to expect such reforms now.

Gabriel Daly has been an Augustinian priest for more than 65 years. The latest of his many books is The Church: Always in Need of Reform (Dominican Publications).

Gabriel Daly-The Tablet