A New Concordat?

Vox temporis, vox Dei: The voice of the times is the voice of God. On issue after issue we’re told the Future has spoken. History has issued its irrevocable decrees, and woe unto him who does not heed them. This atmosphere of inevitability was on my mind as I read Dietrich von Hildebrand’s Nazi-era memoirs. They have recently been translated by John Henry Crosby and John F. Crosby, and they serve as the centerpiece of a collection of his anti-Nazi writings, My Battle Against Hitler: Faith, Truth, and Defiance in the Shadow of the Third Reich, just out from Image.

One is impressed by Hildebrand’s prescient recognition of Nazism’s threat to civilization. He often refers to it as “the Antichrist.” But more important, at least for me, these remembrances of Germany’s dark decades are filled with lament over the many instances of Catholicism’s capitulation, even collaboration. There were heroic exceptions, yes, as well as countless individuals who lived in quiet opposition. But the official Church too often went along. Facing the very different challenges posed by the sexual revolution, we can learn from this sad episode in the Church’s history.

Hildebrand converted to Catholicism in 1914, and after the war he took a teaching appointment at the University of Munich. It was during the postwar period of political unrest, assassinations, and paramilitary conflict that Hitler launched his movement in Munich and participated in the failed 1923 Beer Hall Putsch.

Hildebrand saw in Hitler a profoundly anti-Christian spirit. This was not because of the nationalism and anti-Semitism Hitler promoted. Hildebrand vigorously opposed both, but sadly these attitudes were widespread. Rather, it was Nazism’s belief in power and its promise that the knotted difficulties facing Germany could be simply cut—and cut with a sharp, ruthless blow. This mentality was capable of justifying anything.

As Hitler rose to power in the early 1930s, Hildebrand rang the alarm bell again and again. Active in Catholic intellectual circles, he gave papers denouncing “the poison of collectivism.” He tried to rally colleagues and to put spine into church leaders, but without much success.

Some were drawn to Nazism’s exaltation of sacrifice for the fatherland, thinking it a useful antidote to modern individualism. Others fixed on the peril of communism.
The relevance of Hildebrand's memoirs, then, is not to be found in his analysis of Nazism. Instead, it rests in his observations about why the Church was unable to maintain a clear institutional witness against Nazism. For we too are living in a time of revolution when there are great pressures to accommodate and collaborate. We too are tempted to endorse concordats with the new cultural regime envisioned by today's sexual revolutionaries.

We've already accommodated. Since the furor over *Humanae Vitae* upon its release in 1968, the Church has largely refrained from condemning the sexual revolution. Seeing that contraception was a battle it was going to lose, church leaders adopted a "Don't ask, don't tell" policy. The same goes for other transgressions of church teaching. Priests in the parishes may deal with the sexual revolution in the confessional, but they're not challenging it in the pulpit.

In short, Catholicism in the West has conceded the bedroom to the sexual revolution. The Church remains officially opposed, but when it comes to sex, bishops and clergy refrain from saying very much about private choices. This easygoing approach is now being tested, however. The sexual revolution has moved into a new stage, one that demands public recognition and endorsement. The HHS contraception mandate requires church-related institutions to collaborate with the dominant, contraceptive culture of our time, and to do so in a public way. This is why the mandate has been a bone in the throat of Catholic institutions in a way that widespread use of contraceptives among Catholics hasn't.

This is even clearer in the case of homosexuality. A dimension of the sexual revolution, it has always been unique in its claim for public space. There are gay neighborhoods and gay-pride parades. "Coming out" asserts the right to a public sexual identity. Contrary to what many outsiders suppose, the Catholic Church in America has in many ways acquiesced to homosexuality's demand for public space. In 2012, the city council in Omaha, my former hometown, passed a gay-rights ordinance without official opposition from the Omaha archdiocese. Most dioceses with large cities have one or more gay parishes. (It's telling that nobody speaks of a contracepting parish or a cohabiting parish, or a parish for the divorced and remarried.) Some religious orders, especially women's orders, are known to be gay-friendly, even outspokenly so. Until the sexual-abuse crisis rocked the Church, many bishops had a policy of welcoming gay men into the priesthood. The official doctrine of the Church was quite clear and unchanged, of course, and for the most part these accommodations have been tucked away in remote corners. The Church maintains her public identity as an adversary of the sexual revolution.
Now, the terms of engagement are changing. The institution of marriage is being redefined to allow for same-sex unions. Given the central role of marriage in social life, this puts great pressure on Catholics and Catholic institutions to shift from accommodation to collaboration.

Some succumb to the pressure. My old employer, Creighton University, joined the ranks of a number of Catholic universities in providing benefits to same-sex partners of employees. University president Fr. Timothy Lannon, S.J., cited imperatives of “social justice” and defended the decision as “consistent with our efforts to foster an inclusive, compassionate and respectful campus environment.”

He goes on to assert that “the extension of benefits is not a statement of approval of same-sex marriage.” Perhaps, but the real question is whether Creighton (or anyone else) can disapprove of marriage while offering benefits to same-sex spouses. Unlikely.

As Hildebrand recalls with anguish, although the concordat with Hitler’s Germany did not mean the Vatican was endorsing the Nazi regime, it undermined resistance.

The same goes for recognizing gay marriages. As Archbishop Chaput observes in his Erasmus Lecture published in this issue (“Strangers in a Strange Land”), the public reality of marriage gives its redefinition powerful “sign value.” If we negotiate unofficial concordats with same-sex marriage of the sort Creighton has—not “approving,” mind you—then it’s hard to maintain the Church’s public identity as a teacher of truths about sex, marriage, and the family that are at odds with the sexual revolution.

An Uncertain Future

Will Catholicism, then, forge a concordat with the sexual revolution? The decision made by Creighton University doesn’t tell us very much. Nor does a similar decision made by Notre Dame under somewhat different circumstances. The Church is a very large, international, and diverse institution. But we can identify pressures and counterpressures likely to shape Catholicism’s response to the new challenges posed by the sexual revolution, at least in the West.

First, then, the pressures to find a modus vivendi. Today, American Catholic institutions like Creighton and Notre Dame are run by upper-middle-class Americans more loyal to their class and its values than to the Catholic Church’s historic teachings, which have in any event not been passed down over the past fifty years.

This bourgeois loyalty does not mean Catholic leaders lack faith. But it’s existentially painful for them to be out of sync with dominant opinion. Being pro-gay rights is today’s badge of honor. I don’t think many Catholics who want to move among the Great and the Good will refuse that badge. The same goes for one of today’s god terms: inclusive. It functions like a secret handshake that signals membership in the elite. That will be hard to resist. Moreover, open dissent now brings personal risks. Anyone deemed insufficiently “gay-friendly” faces career obstacles.

The pope himself offers little in the way of encouragement to resist a convenient fusion of Catholic and bourgeois life, an ironic but predictable outcome given the tenor of his papacy so far. He routinely denounces Catholic conservatives as small-minded and warns us not to “obess” over the issues central to the sexual revolution: abortion, contraception, homosexuality. However, one reads his intent in these and other statements, there can be no doubt they provide handy talking points for those who want to capitulate on gay marriage or other aspects of the sexual revolution.

Finally, there are powerful sociological and economic forces at work. For more than a millennium the Catholic Church has been intertwined with other establishment institutions in the West. The sexual revolution now has the full loyalty of these institutions. The university promotes its causes. Google has announced that it will pay for female employees to freeze their eggs, a sure sign that the great corporate engines of capitalism are now allied with it. Even the military now officially endorses it. As the sexual revolution becomes the new normal, the Church will be tempted to relax its opposition and reconcile itself to “the inevitable.” This will seem prudent, the course of action deemed more likely to protect the Church’s interests and preserve its historical alliances with other powerful institutions. Put more crassly, it’s harder for bishops to raise money from a secularized Catholic elite that’s increasingly angry about the Church’s intransigence.

These pressures make me think it impossible for the Catholic Church to avoid some degree of accommodation and even collaboration with the sexual revolution. That’s already happening, as I observed above. This should neither surprise nor scandalize us. There is no instance in the Church’s history in the post-Constantinian era when she hasn’t accommodated herself to powerful political and cultural trends. I strongly believe that Catholicism provides an enduring witness to the truths of the faith. But it tends to work from within as leaven rather than from without as a radical alternative.

However, there are factors that work the other way. The first and most powerful is the Bible. It has a great deal to say about sex, all of which speaks against a concordat with the sexual revolution. This was not true of the Church’s accommodation of the warrior culture of the early Middle Ages; the Old Testament is full of warriors,