

“A Lesson of Unity from Catholicism: the Experience of Maurice Blondel and Alfred Loisy during the Challenge of Modernism.”¹

During the 19th century, the authority of the Catholic Church was attacked from inside and outside. On one hand, Napoleon Bonaparte imprisoning Pius VI, putting a temporal end to the state of the Vatican. On the other hand, many Catholic theologians challenged traditional Catholic authority, under the influence of protestant theology. These internal attacks caused a deep crisis in the Catholic Church reflected in three waves of attempts against modern thought.² The first attempt culminated with the First Vatican Council. The second one, in which Maurice Blondel and Alfred Loisy were among the main actors, was the most important,³ provoking exceptional efforts of the Catholic leadership to reaffirm church authority⁴ and unity.⁵

The Catholic “modernist” were looking for alternative ways of interpreting their faith in order to reform the Catholic Church, providing at the same time a valid alternative to liberal Protestantism.⁶ In this context Blondel and especially Loisy, try to answer to the liberal positions of the Protestant scholar Adolf Von Harnack.

The Catholic answer

The Catholic official answer to the second attempt of modernism came in 1907 through two main documents: (1) the letter *Lamentabili sane exitu* in which Pope Pius X condemned 65 errors of the modernists,⁷ affirming that they were corrupting the dogmas;⁸ and the encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, only three months later. The term “modernists” was first employed, with a very negative meaning⁹ “not by the modernists themselves, but by the authorities who condemned them”¹⁰ as dissident.¹¹ The encyclical *Pascendi* reaffirms Catholic Fundamentalism against modern thought.¹² The modernist philosophers and theologians were accused of agnosticism, immanentism, and

of inconsistency in their doctrinal approach.¹³ The Encyclical was so hard against modernism that it discarded any possibility of openness in Catholicism,¹⁴ distorting the real intentions of the modernist Catholic scholars, to the point that most of them abandoned the idea of modernism to avoid problems with the leadership.¹⁵

Blondel and Loisy

Though both French scholars, Blondel and Loisy received different treatment: while Loisy was excommunicated one year after the encyclical *Pascendi*, Blondel received no personal warning or excommunication. Blondel was a philosopher, a spiritual layperson, who influenced other Catholics to become more modernists than himself.¹⁶ Some consider him just a precursor to the modernist movement, because he showed a strong willingness to remain in conformity with Catholicism. Others, however, consider Blondel a modernist because of his quest for an understanding of humanity that was open to ways other than neo-scholasticism.¹⁷ In his doctoral thesis “*L’action*” (1893) he affirmed that philosophy “can be fully rational while at the same time being open to religion.”¹⁸ He remained an active Catholic after the publication of the Encyclical *Pascendi* (1907), but he did not publish anything related to Christianity and philosophy until after 1934, when he wrote several essays, which inspired the *Nouvelle Théologie* in the period corresponding to the third attempt against modernism.

Alfred Loisy, ordained priest in 1879, struggled to reconcile the traditional doctrines of the Church with the scientific conclusions to which his studies led him under the influence of Renan.¹⁹ His first clash with the Catholic leadership came in 1893. The rector of the Institute Catholique, Mgr. D’Hust, wanted to publish in the Catholic periodical *Le Correspondent*, an article in memoriam of Renan with the purpose of promoting scientific biblical studies. The article, which mentioned the work of Loisy, seemed to depart

Davide Sciarabba, Andrews University
davidesciarabba@gmail.com

from the Catholic concept of inspiration of Scriptures.²⁰ The Pope reacted asking for a retraction, something that D'Hulst did, while Loisy did not. Thus, Loisy was dismissed and a few months later (1894) sent as chaplain to the Dominican school of Neully in Paris.²¹ Continuing with his critical approach he wrote, *La crise de la foi dans le temps présent: Essais d'histoire et de critique religieuses* (known as *l'essais*), completed in 1899, but never published.²²

In 1902, Loisy published his most famous work, titled "*L' évangile et l' église*," in which he defended his understanding of the Church and the gospel, reacting against the liberal Protestant Adolf von Harnack,²³ by attacking both Protestantism and some Catholic beliefs.²⁴ He published four more books in 1903, marking a definitive separation from Catholicism. On March 7, 1908, despite he did not want to leave the Church, to which was profoundly attached, he was excommunicated.²⁵

A Catholic Critique of Blondel and Loisy

Both Blondel and Loisy were viewed as modernists by conservative Catholics, and both brought into Catholicism new ideas that challenged the neo-scholastic system of doctrines. Even if they worked in different areas, philosophy for Blondel and theology for Loisy, both were very innovative in their fields.²⁶ From a traditional Catholic perspective, both could be considered "heretical" and both introduced revolutionary ideas. Blondel's immanent philosophy threatened neo-scholasticism on how God relates to human beings, and on the human ability to act and change its destiny despite God's transcendence. Loisy's historicism and criticism threatened the doctrine of revelation and the authority of the Church. From the Catholic view point Blondel was not less, and perhaps even more, innovative than Loisy in challenging the Church. The question that we want to arise here is why was

Loisy excommunicated while Blondel was not? My paper claims that the reason does not rest only on the content of their writings, but on their attitude.

Blondel's attitude toward Neo-Scholasticism

Blondel, confronted with neo-scholasticism and the scientific method, wanted to bridge the gap between Catholicism and the scientific community by being accepted by both, which was a very difficult task.²⁷ However, even if his thought was clearly modernist, pushing Catholicism toward rationalism, he never attacked neo-scholasticism,²⁸ considering it as valid approach.²⁹ Though stressed, until 1904 he kept a relative silence, trying to avoid the attacks of the leadership. He made a pilgrimage to Lourdes to seek light and detachment from his own views.³⁰ He understood that the tensions were so violent that he decided to keep himself aside from the public controversy that surrounded the apologetic question. He suffered under these circumstances from 1896 to 1904, seeing himself misunderstood and misrepresented by scholastic representatives of orthodoxy.³¹ These tensions became for him a source of real knowledge and gave him a devotion that allowed him to measure the mistakes of the past, and to ponder the meaning of the present and future challenges. Before the admonition of the encyclical *Pascendi*, Blondel expressed his desire with these words: "To set apart myself for a renovation and a complete revision of the benefits of the encyclical *Pascendi* and my long proof of disability. To mature the discovery brought by the two thoughts".³² Blondel's spiritual disposition helped him to avoid reactions against the encyclical and at the same time growing spiritually,³³ trying to justify himself and the catholic positions at the same time.³⁴ In *Les Thèses de rechange*, written in 1912, he answered to Marie-Benoît Schwalm and Ambrose Gardeil showing a change in his position toward scholasticism because of his ignorance concerning the scholastic mentality when he wrote about it previously. However, his general evaluation of scholasticism was still negative.³⁵ In 1915, he respects the

injunctions of the Encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879), but at the same time, asks the theologians to go back and restudy Aquinas in a deeper way.³⁶ I deduced that Blondel renounced fighting against Catholicism, showing a spiritual and humble attitude, waiting for the right moment to give his pacific answer.

Loisy's attitude toward Neo-Scholasticism

Loisy's attitude towards scholasticism was very aggressive since his studies at the seminary. He found Aquinas unpersuasive, advocating the scientific study of the Bible, as preferable to the vain, metaphysical speculations of Thomism and scholasticism. His fighting approach made Loisy such a controversial figure in Catholic circles.³⁷

His opposition to the politics of the Catholic hierarchy appeared prominently in his "Essais d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses," and in *L'évangile et l'église*, where he accused Catholicism of holding people "in a state of perpetual childhood" by undermining "the autonomy of individual conscience ... of science and reason."³⁸ Loisy contested the imposition of the Vatican's authority upon personal, social, and political autonomy.³⁹ His discontent against the political pretensions of the Catholic leadership pushed him to ally himself with the republican government of France against the Vatican.⁴⁰

Between 1904 and 1907, Loisy was pressured by Cardinal François-Marie-Benjamin Richard to submit formally to the condemnation of his book, but he did this to his regret. He appealed to the Pope in defense of his positions, but his appeal was rejected, and this rejection weakened his willingness to remain in the Church.⁴¹ He declared always his allegiance to the Church until he was excommunicated on March 7, 1908,⁴² after his publication of *Simple réflexions*,⁴³ where he contested *Pascendi* for its abusive language and content.⁴⁴ He finally understood that Catholicism, condemning all modernists, did not want to open itself to new ideas.

Conclusion

The analysis of the case Blondel - Loisy, allows us to conclude that the writings were not the only factor causing the excommunication of Loisy. The crucial factor was his aggressive attitude in his counterattacks to each Catholic accusation of modernism.

Blondel's far-sighted vision and calm attitude kept him from reacting against the Catholic condemnation, and maintained his influence within the church. In fact, after the publication of the Encyclical *Pascendi* in 1907, he remained an active Catholic but did not publish any major work until 1934. After he published many volumes that had a significant influence on Catholicism.⁴⁵ These works inspired "La Nouvelle Théologie" (the new Theology) during the 1940s and 1950s, which gave birth to the third Catholic attempt against modernism, which led to the Second Vatican Council. By suspending his polemic publications and stopping to fight for his convictions, Blondel was able to inspire and influence Catholicism even after his death (1949) without being excommunicated.

Loisy's attitude was more intransigent, naïve, and perhaps arrogant. He attempted to change the entire system of neo-scholasticism in a short time, erasing centuries of philosophy and theology. After almost each official act of the Catholic Church against his writings or against his thought, he reacted strongly, defending himself by questioning the authority of the Church, and taking position against the leadership. The conclusive factor in Loisy's excommunication was his rebellion against the Church's authority.

Despite the similarity of their writings, these two "reformers" had a completely different outcome because of their attitudes. With his humble and irenic attitude during the crisis, Blondel was later able to inspire and consequently to reform the Church through his writings, even after his death,

while Loisy, with his obstinate attitude, not only failed to help to reform his Church, but became an enemy to it.

From the Blondel and Loisy's case, we can learn a lesson of unity and commitment to the church. The respect for authority and the desire for unity does not only depend on theological assent, doctrinal acceptance or agreement on dogmas, but also on attitude, because theological assent can be just a question of convenience and interest, and not of willingness and love. Theological dissent⁴⁶ is not the ultimate threat to unity.⁴⁷ The most dangerous threat to unity is attitude. The terms "dissent" and "dissident" come from the Latin *dissentire* – to perceive apart, and *dissidere* – to sit apart, which do not imply a total separation from the group because the dissident still sits in the church even if not on the same side of the major group.⁴⁸ Even in Catholicism dissent is tolerated under determined conditions.⁴⁹ Blondel being in dissent because of his writings decided to become in assent under a "respectful silence (*silentium obsequiosum*) that abstains from manifesting disagreement", a "religious" assent that "is motivated by the personal obedience to the authority of Christ who commissioned the church through the apostles to teach in his name."⁵⁰ This means that "if the mind is not able to be convinced of the truth of the teaching on the basis of the evidence or reasons presented, then the will intervenes to motivate the subject to assent on the basis that the authority to teach comes from Christ and will be preserved from error under the guidance of the Spirit."⁵¹

I do not mean that dissent must be avoided at all costs; I only mean that a spiritual attitude will help scholars to recognize the right time and the right way to manifest their dissent.⁵² Scholars have the duty to wisely ponder the presumable consequences of their teachings⁵³ (1 Peter 5:1-4).

Blondel showed his spiritual attitude, in many ways: first, in his **Christian commitment to his faith and church**, attending the worship

services of his community, studying with others, and listening to the official answers to his questions. Secondly, in his great **humility**. When *Pascendi* was published, he humbled himself, questioning his own writings. Thirdly, in his **willingness to remain faithful** to his Church. Even if he understood that the church needed a radical change, he did not want to cause problems but he waited until the right time to speak. This was his key of success in contrast with the personal ambition of Loisy, to get the credit for the reformation of the church. Fourth, in his **patience**. For thirty years he remained silent because the Church was not ready to accept the new "truth". After that Blondel decided to write again on the topics presented during the second attempt. His attitude helped his church to accept a new light and to reform. Loisy's attitude, on the contrary, excluded him very soon and forever as reformer of the Church.

In other contexts God can call us also to reform the church. Without the right attitude, if division and rupture happen, reformation will be difficult. Unless God is calling us to "force the times," as he did with Luther and others, a prudent spiritual attitude is the key to reform the Church. A right spiritual attitude means loving the church despite its eventual wrong judgments, enduring suffering produced by the mistakes of the leadership, and being faithful by making a step back if necessary. In these conditions, God is able to keep unity in the church and make the church grow even through dissent.

In conclusion, if the spiritual attitude of a man like Blondel could help to introduce change in a very closed, strict, and oppressive Catholic context during the controversies about modernism, I believe that our spiritual attitude as scholars may as well make it easier to change and reform our church without breaking its unity.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7

8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43

44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53