

# Interview with Dr. Robert George

**PETER A. LILLBACK**

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Dr. Robert George is the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University. He serves as director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions and is the Herbert W. Vaughan senior fellow of the Witherspoon Institute. He is frequently a Visiting Professor at Harvard Law School. He has served on the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and the President's Council on bioethics, and as Chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. He holds degrees from Swarthmore College (BA), Harvard Law School (JD in Law), Harvard Divinity School (MTS), and Oxford University (DPhil in philosophy of law, BCL and DCL). He is the author of numerous books, among others, *Making Men Moral: Civil Liberties and Public Morality* (Oxford University Press, 1993); *Clash of Orthodoxies* (ISI Books, 2001); *In Defense of Natural Law* (Oxford University Press, 1999); *Great Cases in Constitutional Law* (Princeton University Press, 2000); with Christopher Tollefsen, *Embryo: A Defense of Human Life* (Doubleday, 2008); and with Sherif Girgis and Ryan Anderson, *What Is Marriage?: Man and Woman: A Defense* (Encounter Books, 2012).

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This interview of Dr. George, a noted conservative scholar and committed Catholic, seeks to present his perspectives and commitments clearly and does not necessarily represent the views of *Unio cum Christo*.

**PETER LILLBACK:** *It's a pleasure today to interview Dr. Robert George at Princeton University, at Whelan Hall, home of the James Madison Program, which is part of the University, and the Witherspoon Institute, an independent research center in Princeton. These two ministries or scholarly centers are works he has been involved with for many years, helping to shape conservative thought that impacts a secular world. This interview is on a special topic: the Jubilee of Vatican II (1962–1965). Dr. George is a devout Catholic scholar, and I am a Presbyterian minister working with Westminster Theological Seminary. In this anniversary year of Vatican II there are many questions about the relationship between Catholics and Protestants, the impact of that extraordinary council, and how it's still shaping the world. So, we are very grateful for this interview, and thank Dr. George. Can you give us a little bit of background on your own religious pilgrimage?*

**ROBERT GEORGE:** Well, my grandfather came from Syria fleeing the oppression of the Ottoman Turkish government. He came originally to New York, worked on the railroads up in Upstate New York around Ithaca, and then found work in the coal mines in Appalachia. I grew up in West Virginia. Being Syrian and Christian he was Antiochian Orthodox, so that's one side of my family.

**PL:** *Some would say that's the original Christian church. Is that right?*

**RG:** Antioch is where the label Christian got attached to the disciples of Jesus; it's a very ancient and beautiful tradition, imbued with the spirit of early Christianity, deeply mystical, and also deeply Trinitarian, with a profound sense of the Triunity of the One God. My mother's father came from southern Italy. He was fleeing not political oppression but abject poverty. And he came again to New York and then went out to Utah where—he was literally a child—he was working in the coal mines out near Sunnyside, Utah. He then moved back east, where there was work in the mines in West Virginia. While there, he saved up his money and did what a lot of Italian people who came to the United States did: he went into the grocery business and built himself a nice little business. So my parents were both children of immigrants. Of course, my mother's family being Italian was Catholic, so I've had the advantage of having one side of the family being Eastern Christian and the other side Western Christian, of experiencing both of these profound traditions of Christianity.

And at the same time, of course, I was growing up in West Virginia, which was predominantly Protestant. We didn't in those days say "Evangelical," but certainly the people I grew up with, by and large, were people who would be today described as Evangelical Protestants, so I got an appreciation of

that tradition. My very best friend, when I was a little boy, was the son of a Southern Baptist preacher. Now by the time we became friends his father had died, so I never knew his father. He died when my friend was a baby. But I knew his widow, my friend's mother, and she would take us to the movies of the Billy Graham Crusades when they came to town, so I got exposed to Evangelical Protestantism in the first case through growing up around Evangelicals in West Virginia.

**PL:** *And today would you be part of the Orthodox Church or the Catholic Church?*

**RG:** I'm part of the Catholic Church. We were brought up in the Catholic Church. There was not a Syrian Orthodox Church anywhere near where we lived. Actually, the closest one was across the border in Pennsylvania, up towards Pittsburgh, in the town of Brownsville. So when there were events in my father's family, baptisms, weddings, and so forth, we would drive up to Brownsville. It seemed like a long way away then, before the Interstate highway was built.

**PL:** *As you think about Vatican II in this Jubilee Year, what does that great council mean to you personally as a Catholic scholar and as a professor? What implications does it have for your work?*

**RG:** Well, it's first of all a very important council. A lot of conservative Catholics are at least a little skeptical because the Second Vatican Council seemed to unleash liberal forces within the Church that began to undermine the Church's historic doctrinal and moral teachings. I don't, myself, see it that way. Now, I do understand that a lot of people used the Second Vatican Council as an excuse to begin selling out to worldly moral conceptions, but that wasn't the Council's fault. What the Council taught in my judgment was good and true. It was really drawing from the great treasury of Christian faith some important implications that the Catholic Church had not really fully taken on board; for instance, the importance of a robust conception of religious freedom. The Catholic Church had been skeptical all the way through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century about the concept of religious freedom.

**PL:** *Is it fair to say that the American influence had some impact?*

**RG:** Oh, yes. There's no question that the American influence had a positive impact. But let me first say why the Catholic Church had historically been skeptical. The Catholic Church, of course, was largely, for most of its history, a European church. Rome was headquarters. They had the bones of Peter and Paul. The papacy has been in Rome, at least most of the time, when the

pope wasn't fleeing for one reason or another. Most of the cardinals, who elected the popes, and most of the popes were Italian until very recently. We had a five-hundred year run of Italian popes before John Paul II, who was from Poland, then Benedict XVI, who was from Germany, and now Pope Francis I, who is from Argentina. But, of course, as Europeans, much of their thought was shaped by the experience of the French Revolution—the bloody, dreadful, horrific experience of Revolution and revolutionary ideology. Now French revolutionary ideology, you don't need me to tell you, was deeply anticlerical and antireligious. And when the French revolutionaries proclaimed religious liberty, the conception they had in mind had components that no Christian could accept: the idea of the comprehensive subservience of the church to the state, the idea that religious vows didn't bind in conscience or that it was immoral to take religious vows because you were trying to bind your conscience against a future change of mind. Obviously no Christian, no Catholic, and certainly no pope or bishop could accept that conception of religious freedom, but as Europeans that was what they understood when the words *religious freedom* were mentioned.

What the American experience showed was that there was an alternative conception of religious freedom that, far from being hostile to religion, was affirming of religion, and created circumstances in which faith could flourish. And so some American Catholic thinkers, led by a great Jesuit theologian, John Courtney Murray, began to have an impact. They began to get through, and so at the Second Vatican Council one of the documents promulgated was *Dignitatis humanae* (On Human Dignity), in which the argument is made both philosophically and theologically that the very dignity of man, given the nature of man, requires that he be free in matters of religion. Free, not merely to believe as conscience dictates but to express and advocate those beliefs, even where someone or the Church itself thinks those beliefs are wrong. Human dignity requires that a person be free to advocate beliefs, free to change religions, free to take one's religiously inspired moral convictions into the public square and vie for the allegiance of one's fellow citizens on fundamental issues of justice, the common good, and human rights. In other words, to do what Martin Luther King did.

Now, that conception of religious freedom is very different from that of the French revolutionary. It's also very different from the modern liberal conception, the secular liberal conception, according to which religious freedom is reduced to mere freedom to worship, and religion is privatized; where the idea is that you should keep your religion in the closet—that it's a matter for prayers around the dinner table or on your knees at bedtime, or for the church, synagogue, or mosque, but not actually for impacting

public life. Of course, the embarrassment of that secular liberal conception of religious freedom is that it would rule out the kind of prophetic Christian witness that was given by Martin Luther King.

**PL:** *Two questions to follow: What view of the First Amendment would properly reflect this whole discussion? Did Vatican II basically get the First Amendment right? Are secular thinkers getting it right today? How would you look at that from your perspective?*

**RG:** Secular liberalism has got it all wrong. It's a complete misunderstanding of both the dimensions of the words "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The dominant view among secular liberals, although there are exceptions, is essentially that of a privatization of religion. Religion is pushed into the private sphere and it can have no real purchase in our public life. People ought not to act in their role as citizens or as lawmakers on the basis of religiously inspired moral convictions, including convictions about justice and the common good. It's their way of trying to put pro-life, or pro-marriage people, for example, into the closet. This is entirely inconsistent with the original understanding—the understanding that was held by the people who gave us the First Amendment. According to that understanding, religion is not to be private; it is to be public as well as private, that is, not the mere freedom to worship but the free exercise of religion, the freedom to act on one's religiously inspired convictions. It is not to impose doctrines—which of course, is wrong, and the founders of our country and the framers knew that and wanted to protect against it. The Catholic Church in *Dignitatis humanae* affirms that it is wrong. Even an erroneous conscience has dignity and must be respected. You cannot force a Muslim to affirm the Trinity. That's not only unwise and imprudent, it is morally wrong. Not because the Trinity is false—we as Christians believe that the doctrine of the Trinity is true, profoundly true—and yet it is wrong to impose it. But it is not wrong to act on one's Christian convictions, or Jewish convictions, or Muslim convictions, prophetically in the public square to oppose racial injustice or the taking of an innocent human life by abortion or in an unjust war.

**PL:** *The Council of Trent had a very negative view toward the Protestant Reformation; Vatican II reassessed the Roman Catholic Church in light of the dignity of the human conscience and our views. How do you think Vatican II changed the way the Roman Catholic Church looks at those who protested against the ancient Church of Rome?*

**RG:** Well, first, I'd encourage all my Protestant friends to understand that

the Catholic Church is not just the Western Church—it's not just the Roman Catholic Church—it's also the Eastern Catholic Church. It's not referring here to the Orthodox Churches but to the many, many Eastern traditions that are in communion with Rome, but are not themselves Roman, or Western Catholic Churches, so I prefer to just speak of the Catholic Church.

**PL:** *Some of us still say “the Holy Catholic Church” in the Apostles’ Creed as we approach the five-hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.*

**RG:** That’s true. We are indeed marking the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, so this is a good moment for Protestants and Catholics to think about this history together, to overcome misunderstandings, to engage the points where we do disagree but engage in a deeply respectful and fraternal way because we are brothers, and this is basically what the Second Vatican Council is affirming, not in the *Dignitatis humanae* document, which was about religious liberty, but in other documents addressing Christian unity. And here you have a very clear affirmation that our “separated brethren,” as it’s sometimes put—those with whom we for now, at least, do not share the Communion Cup—are nevertheless our Christian brothers and sisters.

**PL:** *So now let me probe for a moment: the Council of Trent used the word “anathema” toward Protestants, which is a strong word: let them be accursed. And now we are, Protestants, from a Catholic perspective, errant brothers, erring in Catholic doctrine but in a fraternal relationship. What changed in the Catholic mind from strong condemnatory language to more a sense that we disagree but are a part of a common family? What’s going on there in the Catholic perspective?*

**RG:** Catholics don’t even refer these days to Protestants as “errant” brothers. Something more profound has happened. Now of course, to some extent there are still points of disagreements. However, some of the points that we thought we were in disagreement about turn out to have been misunderstandings, and those have been cleared up, especially in the area of justification by faith.

**PL:** *Let me just stop for a moment; some would say, “That’s shocking! We don’t think we’ve agreed on that!” How would you say there has been an agreement on justification by faith between Catholic and Protestant?*

**RG:** A good place to look is the formal document agreed upon by the Catholic Church’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation in 1999, which makes clear that we believe that justification is by faith and not by works. It is by grace, through faith, that we are justified. We cannot do this ourselves. The Catholic Church

rejects Pelagianism just as the Lutheran church or the other Protestant churches reject Pelagianism. Now, what about works? Well, both sides agree that works are ways in which we contribute to sanctification. They do not justify us, but it's by our good works, as the New Testament letter of James makes clear, that faith is manifested concretely, that we sanctify ourselves and the world. There's a holiness that will be reinforced and expressed when we do the good that our faith impels us to do. So Catholics tend no longer speak of Protestants as our errant or erring brothers.

And part of the reason for that is that Catholics (including Pope emeritus Benedict, who was himself an eminent theologian who conducted many dialogues with Protestant colleagues) now acknowledge—as many Protestants do from the other direction—that we have things to learn and not just things to teach to our conversation partners. What Catholic, for example, would claim not to have something to learn from the thought and witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer? Any Catholic who said that would be a fool! As would any Protestant who said he didn't have something to learn from the work and witness of John Paul II or Mother Teresa of Calcutta. We've had divergent paths. We've been separated for too long, but in our separation we have learned things, we have built things, we have spiritual treasures that we have acquired that we need to make available to each other.

Let me give you another area concretely where I see this to be true. Catholics have nurtured a tradition of philosophical reflection that goes all the way back in our Western civilization to Plato and Aristotle, the great Greek thinkers, and some of the Roman jurists. That is a gift that Catholics can make available to Protestants. Protestants have nurtured a love for the word of God in Scripture, a depth of understanding the Bible which is not common among Catholics, and the use of the Bible as a devotional resource. This is a gift that especially Evangelical Protestants have to share with their Catholic brothers, and this is now happening everywhere.

It's interesting that it did not begin with formal retractions of some of the anathemas used against each other historically, but in a more practical way. It began in the trenches of the pro-life movement when Catholics and Protestants found themselves because of shared devotion to the sanctity of human life and then later in the struggle now ongoing to protect marriage. They found themselves together with shared principles and values and soon came to understand that they are not strangers or foreigners to each other, but that they had a lot of misconceptions about each other, and misunderstandings of what they thought the other side believed. Obviously there are still differences, but the differences turn out to be far narrower and capable of being engaged than either side believed. So what began

perhaps as a marriage of convenience in the pro-life and the pro-marriage movement, and now in the pro-religious liberty movement, became a real spiritual brotherhood. I think that is the great good that God has brought out of the evil of the efforts of contemporary secularism to undermine the pro-life cause, the institution of marriage, and religious liberty. God always brings good out of evil. You know that, Peter. And you've taught me that. You've preached it, and that's what God is doing.

**PL:** *Now let me raise a pointed Protestant question of the Catholic movement. One of the aspects of the Catholic tradition is infallibility in its teaching office and councils. So we have the Council of Trent with its condemnatory language, and Vatican II which has brought about some remarkable things. In fact, the Second Vatican Council makes me comfortable to interview you and delight in our shared concerns for the positive impact of Christianity on culture, and yet Trent and Vatican II take different viewpoints from each other. How can the Church move from one to the other without explaining what has been set aside and saying, "We were wrong back there," and yet still be an infallible Church? This causes a Protestant to scratch his head and say, "You claimed infallibility. But this now sounds like you are saying, 'We were wrong in saying that. We're going to say this instead now.'" How does that work out in the Catholic ideology and its epistemology of religious truth?*

**RG:** The doctrine of the infallibility of the Church, and relatedly the infallibility of the pope in the Catholic tradition, is widely misunderstood, including among Catholics. It is a far narrower doctrine than people imagine. It's still a substantive important doctrine, but it is not the caricature that some people have in mind when they think that if the pope says it's going to rain today, it's going to rain. The key thing, when it comes to understanding where the Church has changed her teaching despite the fact that she claims infallibility within a certain domain, is to try to understand what propositions were being asserted by the Fathers of the Council to be held definitively as matters of faith by the faithful. You can't just read these documents in an uncritical or a superficial way. The same is true of reading the Scriptures. Just as we need to understand what is being asserted by the writers of sacred Scripture and what is to be held definitively as a matter of faith, the same is true in the Catholic understanding when it comes to the historic teaching of the Church, including the teachings of councils and the teaching of popes. Take the teaching on religious liberty we talked about earlier. The Church condemned "religious liberty" and "democracy"—as it understood these things—in the nineteenth century and now the Church affirms religious liberty and promotes democracy. It's the leading institution today in the

United States fighting for religious liberty. Even the people of other faiths are looking to the Catholic bishops for leadership, for example, on the odious abortion-drug, and contraception mandates of the Obama administration. The people are looking to the leadership of the Catholic Church. Same thing with democracy: the Church condemned it in the nineteenth century; today the Catholic Church is a leading force for democracy throughout the world. What happened?

We need to get clear on what the Catholic Church was condemning in the nineteenth century: for example, the French revolutionary idea that all religions were equally true or equally false, or the idea of the comprehensive subservience of the church to the state, or that religious vows don't bind, or that it's immoral to bind your conscience against future changes of mind. The Church would still condemn those, but "religious liberty" today, in the American context, at least, refers to what Americans understand as religious liberty, which is radically different from the French revolutionary understanding.

The same is true of democracy: the Church in the nineteenth century was condemning a conception, prominent at the time, associated with moral relativism, the idea that there is no truth and that what can make something true is a majority endorsing it. No Christian can believe that. No Christian or other morally sane human being would say that Hitler was legitimate because he was legitimately elected. Catholics don't believe that. And so what the Church affirms today is not what it condemned then, and we need to have the same kind of critical attitude when we're looking at what the Church teaches on other topics.

**PL:** *To clarify, infallibility doesn't always hold to what the Church condemns, it has a narrower application in the Church's teaching.*

**RG:** Infallibility has to do with what the Church is stating or condemning to be held specifically *de fide* [of the faith]. And that's why the Church can lift *anathemas*. One of the things that happened at the Second Vatican Council is that the Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church (we leave the Protestants for the moment), the Eastern and Western Churches that had been divided and had anathematized each other for more than a thousand years, lifted the anathemas. Well, if they were infallible, they couldn't be lifted, but neither Church regarded that as infallible.

**PL:** *Have they been lifted vis-à-vis Protestants?*

**RG:** The Catholic Church anathematized certain propositions, but it has in certain cases acknowledged after study and dialogue that the propositions

are not, as previously believed, held by certain of those to whom the anathemas were directed. The best example is from the joint Lutheran-Catholic declaration we discussed a moment ago.<sup>1</sup>

**PL:** *So have the Council of Trent's anathemas been removed at this point?*

**RG:** I think if you look at the actual teaching of the modern popes and the Second Vatican Council on Protestant Christians, as brothers, affirming truths of the faith, you would say that as a matter of fact, some of the anathemas have been [lifted], if not formally. No pope would say today that Protestants just as such are anathema.

**PL:** *So would I be quoting Professor George correctly to say that the anathemas of the Council of Trent have de facto been removed, if not de jure?*

**RG:** We would have to look at the precise propositions being anathematized. If it's a particular teaching, it might have been mistakenly attributed to Protestants or certain Protestants, but if it's something that the Church condemns and anathematizes, then that is certainly the case. But, of course, without critical examination, you could no more be certain that this is in fact what the Protestants held, than you could be certain that in the nineteenth century what was asserted as religious liberty is what the Church has in mind when it talks about religious liberty.

**PL:** *Well, the most important cause in the Reformation was justification by faith alone and I don't know in the agreement that was made that the condemnation of that phrase was ever fully removed.*

**RG:** The teaching of the Catholic Church is that justification is by grace alone through faith alone; that's agreed upon. The Catholic Church not only doesn't anathematize the Protestants, it agrees with that. And because you are absolutely right that the central cause of the Reformation was the

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<sup>1</sup> "Opposing interpretations and applications of the biblical message of justification were in the sixteenth century a principal cause of the division of the Western church and led as well to doctrinal condemnations. A common understanding of justification is therefore fundamental and indispensable to overcoming that division. By appropriating insights of recent biblical studies and drawing on modern investigations of the history of theology and dogma, the post-Vatican II ecumenical dialogue has led to a notable convergence concerning justification, with the result that this Joint Declaration is able to formulate a consensus on basic truths concerning the doctrine of justification. In light of this consensus, the corresponding doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to today's partner." The Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," section 13, Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html).

insistence on justification by faith, that's important. There are other important issues of course, such as the Catholic insistence on freedom of the will (a point debated by Luther and Erasmus), but they are less central.

**PL:** *So would you say then that the Catholic Church today would say that Luther got it right when it comes to justification at that point?*

**RG:** Once again we'd have to look at precise formulations, to the extent that the claim is simply that justification is by grace alone through faith alone, then yes, the Catholic Church would say that he got it right. It would also say that Luther was incorrect in claiming that the Church denied it, or that its affirmation is incompatible with belief in, say, the freedom of the will.

**PL:** *Now, let's take it a few steps forward now. We're living fifty years after Vatican II, and Protestants and Catholics have been in the trenches together. Pro-life issues have been important as well as the defense of marriage. The most recent example is the Affordable Care Act [the federal legislation that established a national health care program in the United States that has also mandated all nonchurch organizations to provide abortion services regardless of its conscience and scruples]. The Little Sisters of the Poor got the limelight, but Westminster Seminary was right there as one of the groups seeking to speak for the sacred rights of conscience. What's happened in our government that would turn conscience to such a secondary issue that now the government says that we don't care what you believe, you must agree with our values? Going back twenty years ago I couldn't imagine our government doing that to any faith organization. What has happened intellectually?*

**RG:** The logic of secular liberalism's embrace of the sexual revolution is playing itself out. If there's one thing that is given priority among secular liberals, again not all, but in the mainstream over everything else, it is sexual revolutionary ideology. It's that conception of freedom that we got originally, I suppose, from people like Margaret Sanger and Wilhelm Reich, that was given scientific credibility by that old fraud Alfred Kinsey, glamorized and mainstreamed in the form of soft-core pornography by Hugh Hefner, and ideologized by Herbert Marcuse, who was a prominent thinker in the sixties and had a great impact on contemporary academic liberalism, forming the people who now are the leaders of contemporary academic liberalism. Well, that ideology is now dominant. You can see it, for example, in the debate over so-called "transgenderism," how sexual revolutionary ideology is prioritized over everything, including feminism. It's telling when feminist heroes like Germaine Greer criticize transgenderism as undermining the tenets of feminism. She is suddenly an outcast. Ironic!

Even issues of racial justice are shunted aside when they get in the way of sexual revolutionary ideology. So an African-American graduate student in counseling is told that she can't be a counselor despite the great work that she wanted to do, because as a Christian she cannot in conscience counsel same-sex relationships in ways that morally affirm their sexual partnership. She wasn't proposing to counsel people in same sex relationships or asking them to separate. She was simply preparing for a career counseling men and women who were married or in a relationship that could lead to marriage. But because she wouldn't—and in conscience couldn't—bend the knee before the gods of the sexual revolution, she's not allowed to be a counselor. They won't permit her to continue in the program or give her a license in counseling. And you see this all over the country time and time again.

**PL:** *Dr. George, you've answered very fully so let's wrap up this interview. Let's discuss Pope Francis I. He seems unsure about where the Catholic Church is going, or maybe we're misreading some of his statements. Do you think there might be a Vatican III and that Pope Francis is saying it's time for married clergy, to reconsider divorcees coming to the Mass, or that perhaps the Catholic Church needs to be open to the LGBT agenda and the old tradition has been too harsh. Do you think that's possible? What are your thoughts?*

**RG:** The Catholic Church and Pope Francis are not going to embrace the sexual revolutionary agenda. The Bible is very clear on questions of divorce and remarriage and on same-sex partnerships or any nonmarital sexual partnerships. On these things the Catholic Church will not change because no change is possible. At the Second Vatican Council, when it came to issues like religious liberty or ecumenism or even the outreach to the non-Christian faiths, it was drawing from the treasury of Christian faith, most centrally the Bible, the teachings of the church fathers, [and] the tradition of the Church itself. It was in the words of the pope who called the Council, John XXIII, an "opening of the window to the world," not so that pagan worldly ideas could influence the Church but so that the Church could engage the world where it actually is and more effectively bring the gospel to the world.

There are some issues on which change is clearly possible and could happen. For example, nothing requires that clergy be unmarried. In fact, we have married clergy in the Catholic Church, not just former Lutheran, Episcopalian, or Anglican priests who converted to Catholicism and then were ordained as Catholic priests and kept their wives and their marital relationships. Not only that, but there are married priests in the Eastern Catholic Churches, fully in communion with Rome, and have been from the very beginning. In fact, priestly celibacy is a fairly late doctrine even in

the Western Church. The apostles were married. Saint Peter, the first pope, was married. We know about his mother-in-law from the Scripture. However, there's a reason for the celibacy doctrine in the Church and a spirituality built up around it. I myself think it's a good but not a necessary thing. That could change.

What cannot change and therefore will not change is, for example, the teaching that women cannot be priests. John Paul II set forth the reasons in his document on the subject called *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* [On the Ordination of Priests]. Jesus did not authorize the ordination of women, and the Church isn't authorized to do so. Of course, Jesus reached out to women. He treated them as equal in dignity to men. In fact, it was a woman, even before the apostles, who first knew of the most important event in human history, the resurrection of Jesus. Or if there was a more important event, it was still a woman who knew it, that is the woman who first learned that she would be the Mother of the Savior, in the incarnation. So Jesus certainly elevated women. No question about that, but he did not designate them to be apostles. Nor is the Church going to change the Bible's clear teaching on the nature of marriage going all the way back to Genesis 2, to which Jesus points when confronted with the marriage and divorce question. Marriage is the conjugal union of husband and wife, the one-flesh partnership made possible by the sexual reproductive complementarity of man and woman. The Church isn't going to change on that, or on the question of divorce and remarriage, or even Holy Communion for the divorced and civilly remarried. Now, the civilly remarried have always been invited, in fact required, if they are Catholics, under Catholic teaching to assist at Mass on Sunday, but so long as they are in a nonmarital partnership, in other words, an adulterous relationship because of the existence of the first marriage which has not been annulled, they cannot receive Communion. So that's where it will continue to stand because the logic of Jesus's teaching requires us to be there.

Of course, there's a debate, and some Protestants have a different view on the question of what the *porneia* exception (of Matthew 19:9) refers to. Jesus says if a man divorces his wife and marries another, he's committed adultery against her, and vice versa, and then says that the case of *porneia*, to use the Greek, is different. Does that mean in the case of adultery, or does it mean in a case in which the marriage was unlawful because of consanguinity (or some other impediment) in the first place? There is also a different understanding about what the consequences of the sinfulness of divorce are, but the Roman Catholic Church has historically held a certain view, and I do not see that changing at all. So I think that we should not rush to the conclusion that Vatican II represented an embracing of secular worldly ideology

and therefore Pope Francis could easily move still further down that line. Vatican II was not an embracing of secular liberal ideology; it was Christian teaching through and through, in some cases correcting or clarifying mistaken teaching or teaching that was based on too narrow an understanding of the possibilities, religious liberty being a good example, democracy being another good example.

**PL:** *But what do we make of Pope Francis's open-ended statements on issues of homosexuality and maybe the Mass and divorce? This has caused conjecture. Some have interpreted his statements as saying maybe it's time to change our interpretation.*

**RG:** I'd respond in part by saying everything I said a moment ago, trying to distinguish change that is a clarification or deepening of authentic Christian understanding, and a change that is rather the embracing of an alien secular liberal neopagan (often Gnostic) ideology. So overcoming the narrow French revolutionary understanding of religious liberty to enable the Church to embrace a sound understanding and actually affirm it is one thing. But saying that the Bible is wrong about the nature of marriage and two men or two women can marry is completely different. And there is no possibility, of that under this pope or any other pope.

**PL:** *Let me ask more pointedly, has the pope been misunderstood or has he spoken ill advisedly on some issues that have caused confusion?*

**RG:** If the pope, any pope, were asking me for advice—and so far I have been spared that burden—but if Pope Francis were to burden me by asking me for advice, I would say it's not good, wise, or prudent for a pope to speak off the cuff, to hold press conferences on airplanes, or to give interviews to people who don't even record or take notes and then report from memory. If you do those kinds of things, you will end up issuing an awful lot of clarifications or having your press office issue an awful lot of clarifications. I think it's better, on the whole, for popes not to speak extemporaneously, but rather to speak through documents like exhortations and encyclicals, because it's important for the world, not just for the Catholics.... When it comes to controversial issues on which the faith is being challenged today by secular liberal leadership, speak in formal documents, in writing, and not in extemporaneous or informal ways.

**PL:** *Twenty-seventeen is the five-hundred year anniversary of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, which most believe launched what became the Protestant Reformation. In light of this coming year, how do you consider the Lutheran and Calvinist*

*contributions to the world in light of Vatican II? Do you celebrate it? Are you glad for it? What is your assessment of this long history, specifically about Calvinism, since we're at Princeton, which has deep Calvinistic roots, with the Hodges, the Warfields, and other great figures of the past, not forgetting Witherspoon?*

**RG:** As with any movement, the record is mixed, but there have been some great achievements. You would not have had the American founding without the Protestant Reformation, which, through its doctrine of religious liberty enshrined in our First Amendment, had a positive impact on the ability of the Catholic Church to develop her own teaching in the area of religious liberty. So Protestantism made an important contribution through the Enlightenment to thinking about freedom. And the Catholic Church has embraced the best in that. So, if the mission of the Reformation was to reform the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church, it's done important reforming from a Catholic point of view.

Another positive thing is that the Protestant Reformation has taught us all, including Catholics, to read and value Scripture, not simply to leave it to the priests. Our Evangelical Protestant friends in particular have encouraged us to use the Scripture in our own devotional practice, and to love the Scripture, to encounter Jesus in the Gospel as a written text. Now what could be more important than that? So there again, the Reformation reformed even those of us who are Catholic. And I could point out other areas where it's been positive.

Now on the more negative side, [we have] the fragmentation of Christianity. What Luther and Calvin unleashed has led to more and more division within the Protestant world and the fragmentation of the Christian church. If we're ever going to put this back together again, and of course, we can't do it, that's a job for the Holy Spirit, well we've made the Holy Spirit's job a little harder.

Another thing in the philosophical and doctrinal area I think is important. If I could talk my Protestant brethren into one important philosophical and doctrinal position, it would be the need to affirm the freedom of the will. Calvinists in particular, because of the laudable desire to preserve a sense of the sovereignty of God and the fact that our salvation is in God's hands and not our own, effectively deny the freedom of the will and walk into one or another form of determinism. I think that's a bad mistake. It undermines the foundations of ethics and of personal responsibility. Working with my Protestant friends on common projects and in those rarer moments when I'm engaging and arguing with them, I want to make the case for the freedom of the will. In the dispute between Erasmus and Luther, Erasmus got this one right. I invite my Protestant friends to go back to that debate. It's a

wonderful debate—Luther, of course, a brilliant man by anybody’s account, Erasmus, equally brilliant, so the sides were equally represented when it came to intellectual horsepower. It seems to me that Erasmus has the better case, and the Catholic Church was right to hold to the doctrine of the freedom of the will. We can do that, I believe, without compromising the important belief in the ultimate sovereignty of God.<sup>2</sup>

My late beloved friend Richard John Neuhaus, a Lutheran minister most of his life, son of a Lutheran minister, with deep roots in the Lutheran tradition, eventually, having said that he would never do such a thing, became a Roman Catholic, and a couple of years later was ordained as a priest. I asked him what changed that caused him to become a Catholic. He said he really didn’t think it was anything theological, and he did not think that properly understood the Lutherans and Catholics were badly divided on the actual theological issues. But he had always thought, for example, on the freedom of the will, that the Catholics actually had the better argument, and what changed was a judgment of his, not theological, but sociological. He had always believed that the purpose of the Reformation and the Reformed traditions was to reform the Church and then fold themselves back into the Catholic Church so that there would be one Church. He believed that was possible for most of his life, but sociological developments, especially in the Lutheran Church, his branch of it, the ELCA [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America], had become very liberal in its moral teachings, it had opted for the ordination of women, it had done things that he believed would simply make it impossible for his wing of Lutheranism to integrate itself into the Catholic Church, having effectively done the work of reformation. At that point, he believed, when it wouldn’t be a corporate reentry, he would enter himself. So I like to say to my Protestant friends, Peter, I think you guys should declare victory and come home.

**PL:** *That’s an interesting perspective! We appreciate that the Scriptures have deepened the understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church on both sides of our discussion. And our hope is that God’s grace is working in our lives. So I’m going to conclude with this question: even though you believe in the freedom of the will, you deny that you are a Pelagian. Is that right?*

**RG:** That’s correct, I do not think that you need to be a Pelagian, or even a semi-Pelagian to believe in the freedom of the will. What we should believe is the freedom of the will and the grace of God; without the grace of God, we are lost.

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<sup>2</sup> An article on the Erasmus-Luther debate is planned in the next number of the journal (Editor).

**PL:** *So would you call yourself a semi-Augustinian then?*

**RG:** Well, yes, in some ways I would call myself an Augustinian, but so did Saint Thomas Aquinas, who understood himself as an Augustinian.

**PL:** *The Protestant movement has deep roots in the Augustinian theological tradition.*

**RG:** Well, Luther, of course, was an Augustinian monk. Peter, thank you for your work and witness and for coming to Princeton to see me. It's such a joy to be with you.

**PL:** *Thank you. God bless.*