

The Catholic Response to Enlightenment and Modernity in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*

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Abstract

Despite a belief that the Catholic Church lost its central place in European society from the eighteenth century, the process of *secularisation* allows us to see how the Church succeeded in regaining its social role in the nineteenth century. Thus, although the Enlightenment and the French Revolution displaced the Church as a spiritual as well as a temporal power throughout much of Europe, it gradually became possible for the Church to come to terms with "modernity." It was aided in this by the momentum of Romanticism, which embodied a longing for the values and sentiments of the Middle Ages, and thus provided an environment in which phenomena such as apparitions gained the popular imagination as well as that of many intellectuals and allowed the Church once more to play a popular role in a society which was developing in terms of science, gender behavior and the politicisation of the masses. The appeal of Rome, through the Ultramontanist movement, encouraged a Liberal Catholicism which, despite an autocratic

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attitude by some popes (Gregory XVI, Pius IX) and the proclamation of Papal Infallibility, led to the modern possibility of a Christian-Democratic alliance in politics.

Key Words: Catholic Church, secularisation, Enlightenment, modernity,

I. Catholic Enlightenment

According to a widespread misconception, the Catholic Church has lost its central power in society since the eighteenth century and has been relegated to a marginal place. “Modernity” and the belief are, in this rationalist perception, incompatible; secularisation, in the historiographical sense of a declining political influence, diminishing social significance and falling-off in church attendance,¹ seems to be the key to understanding the evolution of religion in modern societies. Admittedly, as we shall understand in the present article, the Catholic Church has repeatedly distanced itself, in the most univocal terms, from the basic liberties and values of an enlightened modernity. However, as a closer look at the history of the Catholic Church, the reality was much more complex than the simplicity of some sociological models may suggest. Historical scholarship has demonstrated that the significance of secularisation as a long-term interpretation scheme or theory is a modern myth which reflects the prejudices of its adepts rather than offering a useful theory to describe and analyse the changing roles of religion in modern society (Bruce, 1992).²

It is easy, in hindsight, to present Enlightenment values and philosophy, on the one hand and the Catholic Church in the eighteenth century on the other as polarised opposites, but that is only partly justified by the evidence. Many

¹ Karel Dobbelaere and José Casanova in our view offer the best assessment of the meaning of secularisation. They distinguish three different aspects of secularisation: “secularization as differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms, secularization as decline of religious beliefs and practices, and secularization as marginalisation of religion to a privatized sphere” (Casanova, 1994: 211).

² Steve Bruce provides a survey of this debate in the English-speaking world in the early 1990s (with contributions by Callum Brown, Hugh McLeod, Robin Gill and Bryan R. Wilson, et al.). However, similar statements were made much earlier by French church historians such as Cholvy & Hilaire (1988: 484-495). A recent summary of the anti-secularisation theory can be found in Berger (1999), and in the special issue of Swatos (1999).

eighteenth-century enlightened *philosophes*, revolutionaries and scientists were practising Christians. Moreover, as Peter Gay (1977) has observed, there were openings also in eighteenth-century churches to rationalist approaches to reality, among which we may note the receptivity of the Jesuits and other regular orders to new scientific views (Father Huffier S.J., Father Feijóo D.O.M.) as well as the counter-reformist emphasis on combating superstition. In contemporary terms, we may speak of a Catholic Enlightenment, which developed mainly in the wake of Jansenism and which called for a purer, interior religion. Jansenism was a movement within Catholic theology and ecclesiology which began by stressing the weakness of human nature and pleading for moral rigorism and the return to a more pure, "primitive" Christianity, but subsequently became a political movement associated with the opposition to ultramontanism. The most important book of Cornelius Jansen, bishop of Ypres, *Augustinus*, was condemned in 1643 and 1653, and the movement itself by the papal bull, *Unigenitus*, in 1713. Nevertheless, Jansenism remained an influential intellectual movement during the eighteenth century and its influence, in particular on political thought, was considerable. The professor of canon law in Leuven in the Low Countries, Zeger-Bertrand van Espen (1646-1728), a bishop in Trier, Johann-Niklaus von Hontheim, alias Justinus Febrenius (1701-90) in the Germanic countries, and Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1672-1750) in Italy were the most famous exponents of a large intellectual movement that argued against the pompous Tridentine church in favour of a simplified Catholicism and for princely authority rather than excessive papal power (Hsia, 1998; Callahan & Higgs, 1979). Proto-Jansenist preachers in the Austrian Netherlands and Germany searched for ways to create a rapprochement of the sombre Catholic teachings with more positive approaches towards the world and the human body, which were expressed not only in preaching about death and suffering, but also about

happiness and joy. French late Jansenist authors, in their views on the role of the sovereign in governing the state in the interest of the people and on the separation between church and state, were said to be quite close to those of the early *philosophes*.³

This Catholic Enlightenment may have been unsuccessful in some respects, but - perhaps also, we may add, *because* they were so unsuccessful - such practices paved the way for the radicalisation of the Enlightenment. Furthermore, as in particular some French historians have argued, the Tridentine and Catholic Enlightened “hierarchicalisation” of Catholic practices - looking down on traditional expressions of popular religion - was itself conducive to a certain secularisation (Langlois, 1997; Laplanche, 1997).

Nevertheless, with the Enlightened philosophy the bases of a secularised worldview were laid. The Enlightened princes, of whom, perhaps, in this context the best examples of this policy were Empress Maria-Theresa and her son Emperor Josef II in the Austrian Habsburg Empire, would be among the first to put these views into practice. But it was the French Revolution which overthrew the Ancien Régime with its sacrosanct alliances between throne and altar, and between sovereign and church. The Church lost its many privileges and properties, and was even actively persecuted. With Napoleon Bonaparte, the French Revolution spread over Europe, and marked the start of a new era, particularly for the history of the Church. One should bear in mind, though, that the old order was mostly restored in some countries, even in France where the church was rehabilitated by Napoleon: in 1804 Pius VII witnessed the coronation of the emperor in Notre-Dame in Paris, which contrasted so blatantly with the *dechristianisation* eleven years earlier (1793). Moreover, large parts of Europe - Great Britain and Scandinavia - remained beyond the influence of the French

³ O’Keefe S.J. (1979) mentions, in particular, Jacques Duguet (1649-1733), Nicolas Le Gros (1675-1751) and Pierre Barral (?-1772).

Revolution.

The Enlightenment, with its values of rationalism, democracy and toleration, became the symbol and the philosophical underpinning of “modernity,” which was also used as a sociological term, referring to the process of “functional differentiation.” The separation of Church and State in the French Revolution can indeed be described in such terms: religion lost its integrating power and was relegated to the private sphere, which is also the classic sociological definition of *secularisation*.⁴

Often, increasing rationalism and belief in science - also basic values of the Enlightenment - are seen as a cause of “the decline of magic” and of religious belief. More important, though, was that in the new society, the need for supranational aid vanished, and science slowly but definitively occupied the space previously dominated by the Church. Early nineteenth-century medicine, although still in a developmental phase, imposed itself at the sickbed and in the hospitals, at the expense of the priest, who until then had acted not only as the spiritual guide who would usher the dying safely through the dangerous gateway from Earth to Heaven, but as a physical healer as well (Vandenberghe, 2000).

No doubt these developments in worldview and practical politics - the French Revolution - hit a church that was already in deep crisis. The “Catholic Renewal” (or Counter-Reformation, Catholic Reformation) since the Council of Trent (1545-1558) had been eclipsed. Often, this crisis is ascribed to internal divisions within the eighteenth-century Church. The struggle between ultramontanists and Jesuits on the one hand and Jansenism on the other marked most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even after the final papal condemnation of Jansenism in 1713. The Enlightened Catholics, although even more loyal to and integrated in the Church, had

⁴ See note 1.

their share of attacks. But the Jesuits were also continuously under fire. The mighty order and cornerstone of the renewal finally lost the battle and was temporarily dissolved in 1773 - itself a most eloquent illustration of the loss of papal authority (Hsia, 1998), which was unable to resist the increasing pressures of state governments to extending secular control over the internal affairs of the Church. As William I. Callahan and David Higgs have observed, "Between 1500 and 1790, the States of Catholic Europe achieved a degree of control over their respective churches never achieved before" (Callahan & Higgs, 1979: 10).

But also, independent from civil interference, Enlightened values definitely affected traditional Catholic practices, and the elites that had carried the Catholic renewal lost interest in its prescriptions from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. Pilgrimages, ex-votos, and the demand for requiem masses declined. However, doubts may be expressed regarding the interpretation of these changes in terms of secularisation and dechristianisation. As the French historian Jean Delumeau (1978a) maintains, dechristianisation presupposes christianisation and, according to him, Christianity in fact was not as deeply rooted as one might expect.⁵ Even if Delumeau's judgement may be coloured by his personal views on Christianity, what was happening in fact was a change in the way the dissolving relationship of religion and civil life was perceived. For the Catholic revolutionaries of 1789, for example, the Church ought to be at the service of the people (McLeod, 1997). It should also be emphasised that the decline of some Tridentine practices often started in Jansenist circles, among the most militant Catholics, which could be interpreted as a change in what was to be considered good religious practice (Hölscher, 1995; Venard, 1979).

The image that the Catholic Church projected at the end

⁵ Further developed in Delumeau (1978b & 1983).

of the eighteenth century nevertheless was one of a dying dinosaur. It seemed hopelessly incapable of responding to the challenges posed by the new political doctrines and of adapting to the rapidly changing social and economic circumstances, in particular the growth of the cities and the burgeoning industrialisation, which engendered class conflict. However, the Catholic Church did recover and manage, at least, to a considerable extent, to regain both political space and the hearts of the faithful.

II. Catholicism and the Romantic Movement

Since the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, a cultural momentum had already paved the way for this remarkable recovery. Romanticism became a cultural mood of longing for the Middle Ages, which was considered a deeply religious period as noted by Novalis, Herder, Schleiermacher. It thus also made the church appear attractive again. Although certainly not all romantic artists and intellectuals turned into convinced Christians (many, like Schopenhauer, Shelley, Keats, Vigny and Goya, rejected church and religion), many were attracted by Catholic mysteries. One of the earliest visionary literary expressions of this romantic creed regarding religion is Chateaubriand's *Le génie du christianisme* (1802). Alec R. Vidler described it contemptuously as, "Little more than sentimental" in his "Pelican History of the Church" volume of *The Church in an Age of Revolution* (Vidler, 1985: 21), but that is precisely the point: the new spirit turned its back on the cool rationalist assumptions of the Enlightenment and embraced mystery and wonder, of which the church had plenty to offer. Many romantic intellectuals rediscovered their "mother-religion" and converted; apart from Chateaubriand himself, Félicité de Lamennais, Henri Lacordaire, Joseph Görres, Clemens Brentano and Alessandro Manzoni were among the others. Catholicism in particular benefited from this movement, even at the expense of Protestantism, which was considered by

many too sober a religion (admittedly also Protestantism underwent a revival and reawakening), and Anglicanism, with its many illustrious converts (Friedrich Schlegel, Dorothea Mendelssohn, John Henry Newman).

These intellectuals were exponents of a larger movement and were followed by political and economic elites. Gradually, and sometimes quite rapidly, at least in some regions (large regional diversities certainly were a major feature of nineteenth- as well as eighteenth-century religion)⁶, church attendance and, even more so, vocations started to increase again after 1800. Remarkably, religious orders and congregations, which were roughly dealt with during the revolutionary period, picked up most. Incidentally, one of the signs of the new spirit was the renewed missionary activities of the nineteenth-century Catholic Church, which brought so many missionaries into Africa and Asia, including China.

More important than the quantitative developments, which remained far from univocal and were very diverse depending on the regions, were the changes in the content and significance of these practices.

The popular religion that developed, in many ways followed naturally from the line of Tridentine (more than “Enlightened”) Catholic practices of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Eighteenth- and even seventeenth- and sixteenth-century devotional literature was still widely available and reprinted in the nineteenth century, and largely used as manuals of religious practice. The new popular religion had some proper features though. Mainly, in the words of Ralph Gibson, it appealed to the “heart” rather than to the “head.” It stressed mystery and wonder. While Enlightened Catholicism had tried to extirpate excesses of popular religion, the nineteenth-century Church went with the grain, trying to “clean it up” and control it, as was the case with many so-called

⁶ Particularly emphasised (in the wake of French historians such as Delumeau & Vovelle) by British church historian McLeod (1997).

apparitions of the Virgin Mary, the most successful being at Lourdes (Blackbourn, 1991; Gibson, 1989). Catholic preaching appealed to pilgrimages and popular devotions, such as the cult of the Virgin Mary and the Sacred Heart (Perry & Echeverria, 1988). They are indeed successful examples of the “inventions of tradition” (Eric Hobsbawm & Theo Ranger) so typical of the nineteenth century (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Old and new fraternities and religious orders carried the movement. Numerous pious associations were founded, addressing the middle classes and farmers in the first place, and later also workers. In this process, reinforced after the state-church conflicts of the 1870s to 1880s, in several European countries (Germany, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands) a dense network of associations and practices developed that isolated the faithful from outside temptations, thus also to a large extent determining their lives (how they vote, spend their free time, etc.) and accompanying them “from the cradle to the grave.”⁷

Often this popular religion opposed modern science and medicine. Preachers, for example, severely criticised the “modern” spirit of turning exclusively to the medical doctors for help, thus risking the salvation of the soul, and praised instead the virtues of suffering as a sacrifice to the image of Jesus. Vice versa, the medical doctors complained about the widespread popular practices of relying on pilgrimages and superstition. It is one of the wonders of the time that both discourses were successful at the same time and, at least partly, among the same population.

Feminisation was another major characteristic of this change in religion. Popular (revolutionary) anticlericalism has been described as “a branch of the war between the sexes” with

⁷ This process of “pillarisation” was not restricted to Catholics, but, as Hellemans (1990) demonstrated, it was part of a general process of reaction to the challenges and threats posed by modernity and is a consequence of the formation of social movements, which can also be found among other denominations as well as secular political families, in particular, socialists.

“men who took the lead in closing the churches and often women who tried to keep them open” (McLeod, 1997: 10).⁸ The popular devotion that developed apparently appealed to women more than men, but it especially offered women an escape route from male domination and opportunities to increase their social space, for example in charity work, even when they had no place in the ecclesiastical decision-making process. For the whole of the nineteenth, and undoubtedly for a large part of the twentieth century as well, religion largely became a “women’s business.”

The success of this new popular religion had much to do with new pastoral strategies and the bureaucratisation of the Church in the nineteenth century. Characteristic of the whole change in perspective was the growing centrality of the pope in this process. In these times of uncertainty, whole generations looked to Rome for guidance and leadership. “Ultramontanism” is the term used to describe a complex body of doctrines, values and sentiments that indicated this fundamental orientation to the Holy City *ultra montes* (beyond the mountains that separated Italy from the rest of the continent), which broke with the European Gallican traditions that emphasised the importance of the local episcopacies and the civil authorities towards the papacy. Ultramontanists, on the contrary, saw the papacy as the last recourse against Revolution and the source of the Catholic revival.

One of the main instruments of the papal power was the concordat, by which the pope largely superseded the local hierarchy. This was clearly the case with the first Concordat with Napoleon in 1801. But the concordat was only one of many instruments of increasing papal authority. Canon law was elaborated and codified again, reinforcing papal powers. In the 1860s Peter’s Pence was reintroduced to aid Vatican finances.

⁸ According to François Laplanche following Claude Langlois and Marc Venard, however, this feminisation is one of the consequences of the break of the Tridentine pastoral practice with its urban and peasant environment.

Bishops were repeatedly summoned to Rome. Even the number of papal feast days was increased (Blackbourn, 1991).

The Church's hierarchy was strengthened from bottom to top, and also professionalised and democratised. It offered bright young men from the lower middle class and the peasantry, as well as women in any female congregations, real perspectives on an ecclesiastical career, which considerably strengthened the church's possibilities of effectively penetrating the lives of the peasantry, which had not really been the case with the Tridentine Reformation. Another particular and new aspect of Catholic practice in the nineteenth century concerns the role of the laity, which, because ultramontanism in itself rather emphasised the role of the clergy, was paradoxically greater and more tolerated in some respects, and many initiatives of modernisation were indeed introduced by engaged laypersons, in particular in the second half of the century. There was also, however, greater concern in controlling these activities but the degree of liberty the laypersons obtained in reality to a large extent determined the success or failure of this Catholic renewal in the nineteenth century.

III. Liberal Catholicism

Politically, ultramontanism allied itself with the anti-revolutionary conservatism and traditionalism of Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) and Louis de Boland (1754-1840). This explains why the aristocracy, after becoming alienated from the church in the second half of the eighteenth century, was perhaps the first social class that found its way back to the church. However, there was also another perspective possible.

In contrary to this ultramontane background there were attempts within the Church to come to terms with modern liberties. The most inspiring answers to the challenges of Enlightened views on the role of the Church in society apparently came from those - clerics and laymen - who searched for a way to identify the benefits of the new situation for the

Church. The most influential movement was perhaps that of Liberal Catholicism. Liberal Catholicism is associated with the name of Félicité de Lamennais (1782-1854) and his colleagues Henri Dominique Lacordaire (1802-1861) and Charles Montalembert (1810-1870), who, against the French Gallican tradition of church subordination to the State (*Essai sur l'indifférence en matière de religion*, 1817; *De la religion*, 1825; *Des progrès de la révolution et de la guerre contre l'Église*, 1829), pleaded for constitutional liberties, in particular, liberty of conscience, of education, of press, and the separation of Church and State, including an end to payment of the clergy by the government. The gifted Lamennais raised much sympathy both in France and abroad for his ideals, which he disseminated in his newspaper, *L'Avenir* [The Future] (1830-1831), but he also provoked the hostility of the hierarchy, whose privileges were to be abolished. Also, Lamennais' suggestion that the Pope should renounce all claim to his temporal powers and should only trust to his spiritual authority was not likely to be followed by the person concerned. In August 1832, Pope Gregory XVI in his encyclical, *Mirari Vos*, condemned *L'Avenir*. Lamennais complied, only to rebel a few years later (*Paroles d'un croyant*, 1834). After a fresh condemnation he turned into a republican militant. However, some of his collaborators remained within the Church and loyal to their Liberal Catholic ideals as well.

Liberal Catholicism was also important in Britain (Lord Acton, 1834-1902) and Germany (Dr. Döllinger, 1799-1890), but was in those countries more intellectual, less political and not explicitly condemned. In the newborn state of Belgium (1830), Liberal Catholicism even became a dominant political current, supported by the episcopacy. This particular situation - which was widely discussed in Europe - can more easily be understood if one knows that the Catholic clergy had joined forces with the aristocracy and the Liberal bourgeoisie and middle classes to separate the Belgian provinces from (overwhelmingly Protestant) Holland. The Belgian Constitution,

at the time one of the most liberal constitutions of Europe, indeed granted the Church extensive liberties and opportunities to restore its social position and therefore received the approbation of the episcopacy. After independence was gained in 1830, Catholics and Liberals continued to collaborate in a conservative "Unionist" alliance. However, tensions arose between the Liberal Catholics, who emphasised their independence, including from the government, and the ultramontanists, who wanted to restore the priority of Catholic principles over the secular state (Haag, 1950; Lamberts, 1984).

In Italy, Liberal Catholicism was to be found in the circles of Italian nationalists who supported the unification of Italy. Pope Pius IX (Pio Nono, 1846-1878) during the first two years of his reign also appeared to be in favour of Italian reform and the *risorgimento* (the movement for the unification of Italy). However, he quickly turned into the fiercest advocate of the anti-liberal reaction after he had to flee from the Vatican during the 1848 revolution, when Rome fell into the hands of the revolutionaries. He considered all attempts at merging tradition with modern liberties as treason. During his long reign, he brought together the anti-liberal and anti-modern political views and the new ecclesiology and pastoral practice. The proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary in 1854 was as much an anti-modernist statement as the apogee of the renewed Maryology. The climax of his anti-liberal and anti-modern crusade was reached in 1864, with the encyclical *Quanta cura* and the *Syllabus Errorum*. These contained an overall, unrestrained condemnation of modern liberties and philosophies - ranging from rationalism to socialism and from communism to liberty of the press and of religion. The pope explicitly denied that an agreement was possible between the pontiff and "progress, liberalism and modern civilization." The proclamation of Papal Infallibility after the First Vatican Council in 1870 was another expression of the same concern, even if it had primarily an ecclesiastical

rather than political significance - as its opponents also recognized (Roegiers, 1984).

One might consider that with the *Syllabus* of 1864 the Catholic Church cut itself off from the modern world totally, and in the eyes of many, both Catholics and liberals, that was indeed the case - the *Syllabus* certainly had its part in the increased and renewed anti-clerical attacks of the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s. However, history proved its unpredictable character once again, because it was precisely the defence against these attacks which provoked a remarkable development in *certain* ultramontane circles, supported by the successor of Pio Nono, Leo XIII (1878-1903). The Church - reluctantly it must be acknowledged, and largely influenced by the threatening situation that it experienced and by its assessment of any alternative (reactionary) strategy⁹ - recognised the advantages of mass support for the Church in its defence against liberal attacks and the possibilities that democratic liberties offered. Especially in northwest Europe (Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, but not in France) the Church operated a policy of "turn to the people," based upon its ability to mobilise the popular masses in these areas where the renewal was successful. Gradually, by doing so, part of the Church found a way towards the protection of working-class interests (*Rerum novarum*, 1891). By the end of the century, this development had opened the way for Christian-Democratic party politics, which was to become a major political force in the next century (Lamberts, 1992; Kalyvas, 1996). This, however, exceeds the limits of this article. It is important to understand, though, that the antimodernist reaction of the Church (which was to be continued until Pope John XXIII - remember the condemnation of Catholic Modernism in 1907)¹⁰ did not prevent that same

⁹ Kalyvas (1996) offers an assessment of possible strategies that the Church theoretically could have followed.

¹⁰ Catholic Modernism: A current to search for a synthesis between Catholicism and scientific criticism condemned by Pius X (*Pascendi gregis*, 1907).

Church from remarkable adaptability.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Enlightenment did offer an alternative worldview with far-reaching practical consequences for the position of religion in society, and in particular for the Catholic Church in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, the Church succeeded in finding an adequate answer, and in the nineteenth century the Church successfully counter-attacked. The nature of its reaction was dramatically anti-modern and rejected the values of the Enlightenment and of the French Revolution as well as of modern sciences. However, contemporary scholars have argued that precisely the rejection of modernity, the possibility of refusing the changes of society, is an important feature of a “modern” position; after all it is a position that the church shared with many movements whose “modernity” stands above suspicion, such as socialism, that also rejected the “liberal-capitalist values of the modern world” (Beck, 1997). Moreover, in its bureaucratic organisation and the strategies employed, the Catholic Church also proved surprisingly effective and “modern.” By opening to popular religion the Church demolished the walls that Tridentine teachings had erected between the clergy and the popular masses (Anderson, 1997). The Catholic Church finally found the right words to appeal to artistic and intellectual circles as well as to political, social and economic elites and the popular masses, mostly in the countryside. In the booming big cities, the Church admittedly had more difficulty in establishing a grip upon the masses. Moreover, even in relatively homogenous Catholic countries, the Church had to compete with rival sects and, particularly, new secular worldviews, such as freemasonry and socialism, which incidentally developed semi-religious practices. But even in the cities and among (parts of) the working class, the Church in the late nineteenth century (from the 1870s onwards) was to become successful again, at least in

some regions, mainly through the action of militant, ultramontane laypersons, first in the pious and charitable associations and then in mutual help societies and even political associations and trade unions. In a very paradoxical way the Church, throughout its reaction to the challenges posed by modernity, was to undergo a remarkable change which allowed it to become one of the major forces of “high modernity” of the twentieth century.

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天主教會對啟蒙運動和「現代性」的回應

張淑勤

摘 要

在十八世紀啟蒙運動和法國大革命的時代，向來主導歐洲文化的天主教會失去其社會中心地位。在世俗化的過程中，天主教會似乎和「現代性」對立。但是史家或許要對此做較深層的思考，即教會內部雖被反對「現代性」的言論所主導，卻弔詭地在十九世紀和二十世紀初成功地回應了「現代性」，並且產生了「現代性」的教會。

關鍵詞：天主教會、世俗化、啟蒙運動、現代性