

# A Neo-Catholic Strikes Back



**Teófilo de Jesús**

A NeoCatholic Strikes Back: A Retort to Fr. Joseph O'Leary's essay, *The Rise of the Neocaths*, by Pedro O. Vega, "Teófilo de Jesús," Blogmaster, [Vivificat!](#) Revision 2.

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## **Introduction**

Folks, I want to share with you a detailed commentary of Fr. Joseph O'Leary's essay, *The Rise of the Neocaths*, which you may read at his blog. [The Spirit of Vatican II](#). Needless to say, the essay has captured the attention of many in the Catholic Blogosphere, and also brought out responses from the best known members of our community, such as Dr. Phillip Blosser (*The Pertinacious Papist*), his son Christopher (*Against the Grain*) and Apolonio Latar III, among others.

As a lesser light of St. Blog's, mostly reflecting the light of others, I've decided to throw my hat into the ring and make a point-by-point commentary and response to Fr. O'Leary's essay. I guess that since he's trying to define me, I might as well take away his cards and define myself. His words are in blue, italics, and block-quoted, with my comments following below each paragraph.

## **A Generational Conflict?**

*In a strong article in THE JAPAN MISSION JOURNAL, Autumn 2005, Edmund Chia draws attention to one of the most disturbing phenomena in Roman Catholicism today. He speaks of a younger generation that is "becoming more and more traditional and conservative in their thought patterns" and which Newsweek magazine refers to as the JP2 generation. Andrew Greeley discusses the same phenomenon under the heading "Young Fogeys" in Atlantic, Jan.-Feb. 2004.*

Framing the argument in terms of generational conflict is telling. Baby boomers such as Fr. O'Leary, or gurus to baby-boomers like Fr. Greeley, find themselves today leading an aging population of liberal kids who are as conservative in their 60's dogmas as their parents were before them with their own worldviews. Thus, Frs. O'Leary and Greeley are puzzled and angry that they can't keep a large young audience. Neither Fr. O'Leary nor Fr. Greeley are used to be seen as *passé* by any segment of Catholic public opinion, even less the younger generation who these good priests thought would be their natural constituency.

## **It's all the fault of Pope John Paul the Great**

Yet, there's more to this than a mere generational gap. This is not solely a matter of children rebelling against their parents. "Neocaths" like me dislike Fr. O'Leary's flower-boy stance because the 60's ideas were not all good in terms of their consistency, coherency, or consequences. Maybe we don't like the world Fr. O'Leary is leaving to us and that by itself deserves a critical approach. Fr. O'Leary does not dwell too much on the real reason why we reject him and his confreres. He hates to dwell on that.

*Indeed the one person most responsible for bringing the Neocath generation into existence is John Paul II. I saw the beginning of it in Ireland at the beginning of October, 1979. When the Pope delivered the words, "Young people of Ireland, I bless you, I love you", the youthful crowd roared for twenty minutes until Fr*

*Michael Cleary, the emcee, called on them to quieten down. Even amid the euphoria of Ireland's first papal visit, voices were raised to denounce this as crowd-manipulation. It is said that the Pope viewed the film of the scene over and over again in the Vatican.*

The late Servant of God Pope John Paul the Great—you can certainly see where I'm leaning—was blessed with a gift for communication, but foremost, with an unparalleled moral authority supported by a holy life dedicated to combat all the pagan ideologies that under the guise of different totalitarian systems threatened to destroy us throughout the 20th century. Pope John Paul II was a scholar, a pastor, a philosopher, a theologian, a worker, an athlete, an actor, a poet, a priest, a bishop, a Vatican II father, even a Catholic feminist. He was all the things the Left holds as paradigmatic and yet, the Left and its enablers hate him, including Fr. O'Leary, who dismisses this man's magnetism as he would that of a rock star surrounded by fanatical groupies blinded to the threat he presents.

Why is this? Why do they hate Pope John Paul the Great? Because Fr. O'Leary—and Küng, Greeley, among others—cannot accept the fact that the Pope saw himself to be in a very real way the principal interpreter of the Second Vatican Council, of its documents, and legacy. Pope John Paul brought to an end the pretensions held by many tenured theologians of also being part of Church's Magisterium. Pope John Paul II moved the Church away from the amorphous "spirit of Vatican II" and put her firmly on the objective basis of what the Council really said, not on what it was purported to say. Fr. O'Leary et al. resent that Pope John Paul effected this needed change in direction without asking their permission.

### **Fr. O'Leary attempts a psychoanalysis**

*A stunning essay by Alberto Melloni, the distinguished Italian church historian, in a recent issue of RECHERCHES DE SCIENCE RELIGIEUSE, accuses John Paul II of making his voyages the main form of his magisterium, and substituting a cult of mediatic images for substantive educative communication. (The entire issue of the review, dedicated to the need of a new Ecumenical Council, is worth reading closely.)*

Again, it is the rock star accusation, the theory that the Showman must be dismissed as lacking substance and as mesmerizing his gullible followers. Fr. O'Leary apparently thinks that we can't read the Magisterium of the late Pope by ourselves or that if we can, that we are somehow unable to understand it, some glib, selected quotes aside. But is not only his words, is also his example, captured in so many biographies—for example, that of Tad Szulc and the one by George Weigel—that I've been privileged to read, in Spanish and English. John Paul's aura was captivating precisely because of his exemplary holy life, and holy death. Absent these qualities, then, Fr. O'Leary would be right, it was all a show. The fact that John Paul's life stands this scrutiny grates on Fr. O'Leary.

*Throughout the world, the most visible face of Church and of Christianity for a quarter of a century was that of the traveling Pope, and his privileged target*

*audience in every country was the youth. What psychological need drew them to this super-father-figure?*

"Super-father-figure?" Another telling remark, instilled with Freudian overtones. What's the implication here? Was it the adulation young people heaped on the late Pontiff but a manifestation of unresolved Oedipal tendencies on a mass scale? Was the late Holy Father but a more down-to-earth epiphany of the great Sky Father we all neurotically project as the great solution to all our problems?

Perhaps I'm overstating Fr. O'Leary's argument. It's just that I don't like the good priest's amateur attempt to subject "neo-catholics" to a global pop-psych diagnosis. We so-called "neocaths" deserve better.

### ***A condescending, mocking attitude***

*John Paul II thus bypassed and reached over the heads of the educated baby boomers, influenced by Vatican II, in order to address an audience who were a tabula rasa, and to communicate to them a world view that the Vatican II generation would find problematic on many points. His tactic recalls that of Mao in China. At the same time critical theology was ruthlessly discouraged and suppressed throughout the Catholic world. Fr Chia's article tells how this was done in Asia. The fates of Kung, Drewermann, Leukel-Schmidt, Curran, McNeill, Boff, Lavinia Byrne and many others are a tip of the iceberg of the same process in Europe, the US and Latin America. The more warmly the youthful crowd applauded, the deeper the intellectual chill that fell on the Church.*

This jewel of a paragraph may be described in various ways, let me tell you which: it is full of hubris, insulting both to the memory of the late Pope and to "neocaths," condescending, paternalistic, spiteful, elitist, pharisaic, and foolish. Let's review every single statement, one by one:

- *John Paul II thus bypassed and reached over the heads of the educated baby boomers...* **Implication:** those of us who came after are not nearly as educated as our baby boom betters.
- *...baby boomers, influenced by Vatican II...* **Implication:** my generation was not influenced by Vatican II? We can't read its documents. Or, we have chosen not to read them. Or, perhaps, it is because we read them without the lenses or the guidance that Fr. O'Leary, Kung, Drewermann, Leukel-Schmidt, Curran, McNeill, Boff, Lavinia Byrne, would like us to utilize, where the problem really lies.
- *[Pope John Paul addressed] an audience who were a tabula rasa...* **Implication:** Though Fr. O'Leary uses the term "tabula rasa" derogatorily, I choose to understand it in a more positive fashion. We're talking here about generation who is more aware, more sophisticated than the boomers in the things of the world; what for boomers was a groovy discovery, for us is a matter of ordinary life. We have little preconceptions of that past the "reforming" boomers were so successful

in destroying. Educated boomers, as dreamed by Fr. O'Leary, expected their children—real or spiritual—to rebuild what they had destroyed according to the boomers' wise and "educated" specifications. They became disagreeably surprised when we didn't. We were free to re-conceive the world in our own terms without asking advice from hip priests, fakirs, gurus, and other spiritual guides held in awe by boomers. And then came Pope John Paul II. The rest, as they say, is history.

- *[Pope John Paul was able to] communicate to them a world view that the Vatican II generation would find problematic on many points.* **Implication:** that Fr. O'Leary's worldview is unassailable or at least, that we—the neocaths—lack the intellect to assail it. Somehow, before Fr. O'Leary's eyes, we're either incapable or unqualified to find Fr. O'Leary's worldview "problematic on many points."

### ***Would the real Vatican II Generation please stand up***

Still, there's another, deeper issue here. Who is this "Vatican II generation"? Is it Fr. O'Leary's? I submit to you that the good priest forgets one teensy little detail. The Vatican II generation is not the generation that consciously lived before and through the Council. The Vatican II generation is that generation that didn't know that there has been a "before" until someone else told them as they got older.

I'm part of that generation. I was born in the mid-1960's in Puerto Rico. I went to Catholic school in the 1970s. When I started going to Mass and appreciate what it was all about, it was the *Novus Ordo*. When people spoke of "the Latin Mass," I thought they were talking about the *Novus Ordo* Mass in Latin, which was actually done in some Pontifical Masses. I was vaguely aware of a previous rite and discipline because I inherited the old St. Joseph's Missals containing the 1962 Mass and noticed that something was different, but similar.

I didn't attend a Tridentine Mass until I was in my late 30's—that wasn't that long ago—and when I did, I did it both out of curiosity and because I wanted to reclaim it as part of my heritage. By that time I was already a veteran of numerous Byzantine liturgies. Today, as it has been the case most of my life, I continue to attend the so-called "New" Mass which, as far as I'm concerned, it's "old" for me now.

My religious books throughout elementary and middle school were imbued with both Vatican II teaching and that from previous conciliar and papal declarations. The books in 9th and 10th grade were atrocious; they were flimsy pamphlets containing even flimsier, sentimental teachings based upon the worst interpretation of Vatican II, watered down for teenagers to understand. I've repressed the 11th grade, so I can't remember it.

What I remember is doing my own self-education back then, which also happened to be the days in which I got involved with the Charismatic Renewal. Again, my whole view of the Church was transformed; I learn to read the Bible rightly as a Catholic book, under the tutelage of learned priests and outstanding lay leaders. Otherwise, I probably would've minimized the role of faith in my life down to mere externals; I would've been

lost to the Church as another "cultural Catholic" with no real, deep faith.

Praised be the Lord, that didn't happen. Later on, in the early 1990's, I earned a B.A. in Theology from St. Mary's University in San Antonio Texas. I remind Fr. O'Leary that my graduation date was almost 30 years after the Council closed. I don't get much post-Conciliar than that! I dare to say that most of my colleagues who care about these matters are as *bona fide* members of the Vatican II generation as I am.

I dispute, then, Fr. O'Leary's biased reference to the "Vatican II" generation and his restricting it to those likely-minded to him. That was very self-serving of him, and absurd, to say the least.

Why then, having been educated fully in the post-Conciliar environment, do I reject Fr. O'Leary's approach to Catholic life? Because I find his approach inconsistent with previous New Testament, Patristic and classical Catholic thought and life and therefore incoherent and confusing. Worse: I can't derive any meaningful life of moderation, prayer, and contemplation, from it. I find Fr. O'Leary's, Küng's (not Rahner is ok) and other's thoughts an unstable foundation for a Catholic sacramental and contemplative spirituality, it is too psychobabble, too ethereal, impractical, abstract. In the end, I think, no meaningful integral Catholic life is possible from the ideological Left.

### ***Fr. O'Leary's wild, shameless claims***

- *[Pope John Paul II's] tactic recalls that of Mao in China.* **Implication:** we "neocaths" have been brainwashed by the cunning of Pope John Paul II and as a consequence we've been moved into a frenzy in order to throw the Church into the throes of a Cultural Revolution. To equate the late Pope with Mao is beyond the pale; to ascribe to him sinful motives is presumptuous; to imply that those of us who want to carry on his legacy have been somehow brainwashed by him is a collective *ad hominem* attack, fallacious, and without substance.
- *The more warmly the youthful crowd applauded [Pope John Paul II], the deeper the intellectual chill that fell on the Church.* Only if the self-proclaimed intellectuals taught their own thing not according to the mind of the Church, Fr. Joseph—I'm talking directly to you know, Father. When are you going to learn your place, Father? You don't rule the Church, you are not a member of the Magisterium, you serve the Church and if you serve her, then you are supposed to love and cherish what she teaches, what she stands for. This is a very basic teaching, that I should not be reminding you of.

Do you find the boundary of orthodoxy too constricting? Well, Father, the Church is not your private theological preserve. The Church extends to the past, through the present and on to the future. I belong to the Church because it makes those who went before me immediate to me; they are with us in the same Church. I treasure what they left me. I am sad to see that you have lost that sense of the Church's past as a living reality; you only see it as confined in the pages of some dusty books or manuscripts.

*Edmund Chia says that the JP2 generation are "distinguished by their unflinching devotion to all that the beloved and late Pope John Paul II stood for. They were present in huge numbers at the late pope's funeral. Unlike the baby-boomers or the generation X-ers, the JP2 generation has a greater sense of uncritical loyalty and obedience to ecclesial authority and is more likely to prefer conventional values and traditional church life. Tradition and uniformity are their bywords, while conformity and submission are their operating modes. This is the JP2 generation's way of "rebellling" against their elders, especially those wont to employ a hermeneutics of suspicion when apprehending religious symbols and ecclesial institutions. In a way this new generation is the "born again" generation and feeds perfectly into the restorationist programs advocated by the pontificate of John Paul II, where the hermeneutics of retrieval is given greater emphasis. This involves retrieving what the previous generation questioned or threw out altogether, e.g., the doctrine of papal infallibility, devotional activities, the wearing of the roman collar, cassock or habit, and the reception of holy communion on the tongue."*

My generation treasures critical obedience, Father Joseph. I can be obedient to the Church and be critical in the broad sense of the term "critical." I am not a traditionalist in the narrow sense; nor am I a fundamentalist—in any sense. Critical obedience is free obedience, freely given, Father Joseph. The difference between you and I is that you rationalize disobedience and disrespect, building behind it intellectual constructs so that you can justify the unjustifiable and feel good about it. "Critical obedience" is for you a cliché, a permission to disobey the Church's Pastors and deconstruct the Church accordingly. Not to me, and I dare say, not to my generation. **This** we repudiate from your generation, this we disregard, not uncritically, but soberly, due to the harmful consequences your generation has brought to the Church.

What's wrong with a priest wearing a collar or a cassock, or a religious his/her habit? What's wrong with the testimony this kind of dress gives to the world? What's wrong with some people not wanting to touch the Holy Bread with their hands?—I have no such qualms, btw. What's wrong with holding to the defined dogma of papal infallibility, or to any other defined dogma?

Answer: there is nothing wrong with any of these. The "previous generation"—Fr. O'Leary's super-boomers—was wrong in rejecting them and thus eliminating an eloquent countercultural testimony that was so much needed, and it's still needed today, a testimony of consecration, dedication, humility, and respect. See if the lack of this kind of testimony has helped enhance any of these qualities in today's dominant culture.

*In fairness, the generation of John Paul II Catholics are often blessed with vibrant and joyful faith, and I have been moved and impressed by many who are adherents or products of Opus Dei or the new movements known as "the Pope's Armada". Generally, their wholesome piety is not associated with right-wing ideologies but with a love of the Church as seen through the prism of theologians like Hans Urs Von Balthasar.*

A symbolic, yet condescending pat on our heads after basically psychoanalyzing us as the father-figured-needing, Mao-like-pope following bunch of uncritical anti-intellectuals.

*I reserve the term Neocaths for a vocal ideological wing of the younger generation which is in alliance with older voices and organs such as The Wanderer, Catholics United for the Faith.*

Ouch, Father! Those guys actually cringe at the term. From their perspective, you and I are neocaths of different flavors, but basically congenial; "neocaths" are us of the Vatican II generation. *The Wanderer* crowd are not "neocaths." They are traditionalists, some critical, many of them uncritical. As far as I'm concerned, their views don't necessarily represent those of *neocaths*.

*They are particularly well represented in the blogosphere. They are led by academic mentors such as the philosophers Peter Kreeft and Philip Blosser, and some of the more flamboyant voices are those of Christopher Blosser, Jeff Miller, Jimmy Akin, Oswald Sobrino, Mansfield Fox, Earl E. Appleby, Amy Welborn, Arthur Tsui, and at the youngest (and perhaps most genuine) end of the spectrum, Apolonio Latar III.*

Granted that Drs. Kreeft and Blosser display a sense of academic sobriety in their writings, befitting men of their stature and academic preparation. But, calling Dr. Blosser's son and my better-known colleagues "flamboyant"—"showy, colorful, loud, flashy, gaudy, glitzy, ostentatious"; those are the other words the thesaurus tells me can stand for "flamboyant"—is a crass exaggeration. Nor do I see any of them kowtowing to the *The Wanderer's* editorial line routinely—though I have nothing in against *The Wanderer*, in principle.

Nor are they people without depth: Jimmy Akin is an apologist for Catholic Answers, the nation's premiere Catholic apologetics organization; Amy Welborn is a recognized published author; Oswald Sobrino is a jurist; Apolonio is a theological child prodigy. None of them strike me as the blind, uncritical followers of a rock star-cum-pope, or of his reactionary successor.

### **Fr. Joe's NeoCatholic taxonomy**

*Here are a few traits that seem to recur frequently:*

*The Neocaths are Catholics, with a certain prominence of converts from Episcopalianism or Protestantism. They are people of faith and piety. Their sincerity is not in question.*

Good, good! Only our smarts and our psychological need for a father-figure are in question.

Father, I am a cradle-Catholic. I wish to say that I have been faithful to the Roman

Church, but I can't. Thanks in part to the ministrations of a renown anti-Catholic controversialist named James R. White, I left the Catholic Church "through a Protestant door" back in 1992. I zigzagged within various Protestant churches, into the Anglican Orthodox movement and then into Eastern Orthodoxy, in my empty search for a Catholic Church without a Pope. After a spiritual crisis lasting over a year, I returned to the Catholic Church in 1998, and kept away from Catholic self-expression until last year. So, Father, I am a "reconvert," marked forever by my Eastern experience which, all truth be told, it is a Catholic tradition. Careful with your generalizations. But then again, you spoke about "prominence" so in all fairness, you did qualify your statement.

### **The "sex thing"**

*The Neocaths tend to sexual puritanism. Appalled by the consequences of the sexual revolution, AIDS, abortion, cohabitation, adultery, divorce, pornography, they retreat to the strictest Catholic doctrine as an ark of refuge. They are very vocal advocates and practitioners of a strictly-interpreted concept of sexual fidelity, with a strong emphasis on procreative sexuality. They insist that masturbation is mortally sinful, and have an especial enthusiasm for the teaching that homosexuality is intrinsically disordered and that homosexual acts can never be countenanced.*

What's so wrong with all that? These are the Church's teaching on these subjects! Doesn't Fr. O'Leary believe in sexual fidelity? Shouldn't sexuality be procreative? Aren't intrinsically evil actions—like masturbation—mortal sins when done in full knowledge and freely? Isn't homosexuality intrinsically disordered? Father, are you taking the opposite stance to Church's on matters of fidelity, procreation, intrinsically evil acts, mortal sin, and homosexuality, as perhaps morally neutral, or even "good" under most circumstances?

### **An oath broken?**

Father Joseph, did you take this oath, or a similar one, at the time of your ordination?

*I....in taking up this office promise to always maintain communion with the Catholic Church either in words that I will speak or in my way of acting.*

*With great diligence and fidelity I will fulfill the tasks which I hold the duties which I have with regard to the Church, whether it is the universal church or the particular church in which I have been called to exercise my service according to the prescripts of the law.*

*In the fulfillment of my task which has been committed to me in the name of the church, I will keep the deposit of faith undiminished, I will hand it on faithfully and defend them. I will avoid whatever doctrines are contrary to them.*

*I will follow the common discipline of the whole church and I will promote the observance of all ecclesiastical laws, especially of those which are contained in the code of canon law. With Christian obedience I will fulfill whatever the*

*sacred pastors, as the authentic doctors of faith and teachers declare or which the governors of the church state and I will give faithful service to the diocesan bishops in order that the apostolic action in the name and the mandate of the Church to the exercise will be fulfilled in communion with that church.*

*May so God help me and his holy Gospel which I now touch with my hands.*

### **Why are we "combative apologists"**

How much weight did you give this statement as a guide to your conscience? The question is a fair one to ask, considering your current and expressed dissent from Church teaching.

*They denounce as apostasy a massive rejection of Vatican teaching among Catholics and call for bishops and priests to stand up against the tide of laxism instead of floating along with it.*

Amen, brother! How come you're not?

*The Neocaths are combative apologists. Their apologetics is sometimes directed against Protestantism, which they have no hesitation in branding a heresy. But it is more often directed against liberal Catholicism. They devote treasures of ingenuity to proving that the Church has never changed her teaching on anything -- not on usury, slavery, torture, the Inquisition, the Crusades, and above all not on sexual matters*

We're combative apologists, albeit some more than others and, with different degrees of success and shortcomings, like any other human group.

Do you know why we're a combative lot, Father? Because well-prepared, intellectual, academically-smart priests like you are not doing the job! They—you—seem to spend and inordinate time and ingenuity finding fault and "problematics" with received Church teaching instead.

*The Neocaths are "young fogeys" -- they take a delight in sporting old-fashioned references, such as Chesterton, Belloc, C.S. Lewis, Garrigou-Lagrange, Sertillanges, and in exhibiting all the trappings of traditional Catholic piety -- the Latin Mass in particular.*

I had to look the reference for "fogey" in Merriam Webster's Online—a person with old-fashioned ideas, usually used with *old*—so the pun was lost on me. I've got it now!

I'll tell you why I like Chesterton, Belloc, C.S. Lewis, and Garrigou-Lagrange—I've never read Sertillanges. I do because these men's joined prayer, life, and writing in one single continuum tied up with their lives. As a counterpoint, in all the works I've read by Hans Küng—the best perhaps was *On being a Christian* I've never once saw him write anything about how he prayed, or lived. Küng, McBrien, you yourself, are "saints"

without biographies, shallow, without depths. Your *lucubration* stand as mere abstractions; when put in practice they seem end in doctrinal, disciplinary, and moral disasters. Not so with Chesterton et al. Their lives "tracked" with what he wrote.

Moreover, these writers were daring thinkers in their own regard. The difference between them and you is that they held the past in vital dialogue with their present, without presuming that the past was intrinsically inferior to their present. This humility before the past enriched their writings accordingly. You lack that quality, Father. For you the past is something that is condescendingly acknowledged and then cavalierly set aside in view of "new findings" and "new data."

And I have already said that I am not a "Latin Mass" Catholic, nor expect to become one in the foreseeable future. Get on with the stereotypes, Father.

Oh, and you forgot to include Fr. John Hardon in your list of Neocath preceptors, an "old fogey" who fully embraced the legacy of Vatican II.

### ***When substance is lacking, Fr. O'Leary sows confusion***

*They distrust a list of Vatican II generation writers such as Rahner, Schillebeeckx, Raymond Brown, Richard P. McBrien, whom they often hastily denounce as modernists. At their best they draw they favour those they see as "ressourcement" writers, sometimes including even Congar (a hate-object of many conservatives), over the "aggiornamento" wing (a rather dubious opposition). They often seem to yearn for an idealized church of Pius XII, a vibrant flawless Catholicism that never was.*

You are confusing us with Latin Mass traditionalists and perhaps, some us are. In fact, I consider myself a "traditionalist" in that most Catholic sense that I've received and that in turn we hand down the teaching we have received from our Catholic ancestors. Believe it or not, I've read Rahner—heavy, but not unorthodox; I've read Brown—can't avoid him if one refers to the *Jerome Biblical Commentary* with any frequency—and I like him, although he's not above criticism.

I've also read McBrien's abridged, one-volume version of his *Catholicism* cover-to-cover, more than once. I underlined it several times; wrote little notes on the margins, particularly at the page where he argues that no Christological truth would be compromised if it was ever determined that Jesus' conception was entirely natural. Sure, he didn't directly deny the Church's teaching, but with a wink and a nod, he seemed to say that if the reader doubted Jesus' virginal conception, well that's OK too, nothing's really lost. Instead of clarifying doubts, Fr. McBrien and company encourage them, even water them, and watch them grow. It is the same "demythologizing" drive one observes in Bultman, albeit on a Catholic note.

It is this kind of literary subterfuge disguised as "criticism" and "open-mindedness" that I find so contemptible from thinkers of Fr. McBrien's school, which you applaud, Father Joseph. I don't like to pick up a work by a self-proclaimed Catholic teacher and then have

to parse it the way I had to parse a reply by Bill Clinton on sundry issues. I would expect calculated ambiguities from someone like Clinton, but not from a Catholic priest, yet, here we are.

*The Neocaths combine biblical and magisterial fundamentalism. They argue by proof texts, in complete contempt of biblical scholarship and hermeneutics. Their ingenuity in defending their fundamentalist stances is extreme, and will draw on ad hoc hermeneutics when necessary, but they are estranged from the broad current of Catholic biblical scholarship. A Neocath who would admit, for example, that the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden is not historical would not be a worthy representative of militant Neocath ideology.*

A patently false statement, and a huge generalization. My brother in Christ and contemporary, apologist Dave Armstrong (*Biblical Evidence for Catholicism, Cor ad cor loquitur*), would find such a broad distortion of "Neocath" scholarship laughable. Oh, I am sorry, I forgot that we're all sincere, but dopey believers.

*The Neocaths are ill at ease with modernity. They feel they have seen through the myths of secular humanism, and the liberal culture of democratic discussion which they see as relativistic. They bewail confusion and uncertainty and call for a firm voice of authority to put an end to it.*

Everything's correct in Fr. O'Leary's appreciation, except for the first statement and part of the second. We critique modernity and its assumptions over and over. So does the Church, the popes, and the bishops, all the time. Nor do we equate "democratic discussion" with "relativism." A society can have "a democratic discussion" without being relativistic. At least, I think Jefferson thought the same when he held the absolutes of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as grounded on Natural Law. I don't think Jefferson saw himself as a relativist although he at times behave like one. But that wasn't relativism, that was hypocrisy.

### ***When sowing confusion is not enough, Fr. O'Leary starts smearing his opponents***

*The Neocaths are ideological and political rightists. Issues of social justice never appear on their agendas and Church documents such as *Populorum Progressio*, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Octagesima Adveniens*, *Centesimus Annus* are ignored. Their papolatry commonly goes hand in hand with Busholatry. They play down papal opposition to the Iraq War, torture and capital punishment. Some may be active on social issues, but in their internet polemics this is scarcely in evidence.*

Another bold, broad stroke. "Papolatry, Busholatry," ignorance, indifference to social concerns. He is the broken gong of Liberalism gone mad. Where do I start answering all these charges? I can't, because I don't have the genius, the inclination, or the time. But perhaps we could refer the good priest to Michael Novak's *The Catholic Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* to get a starting point as to where many "Neocaths" stand on these issues.

And you know, I would vote for a pro-Life Democrat presidential candidate here in the U.S., willing to name pro-Life and strict constructionists judges to the Courts. Just find me one and we'll talk, even if he (or she!) weren't Catholic, I would vote for him/her. But I would never vote for one who boasted of his Catholic faith on one side, and yet stood arm-in-arm with NARAL activists singing paeans to "choice" and "reproductive rights." You know, the hypocrisy factor again. It seems that I'll be voting Republican for the foreseeable future, unless they themselves fall prey under the pro-abortion juggernaut. Then I'll look for other candidates.

*The Neocaths are well organized, and have as yet no equivalent on the Catholic left. They know which lines to push and which to avoid. For instance, they will attack gays with a show of concern for the welfare of their souls, and in harmony with the letter of Catholic doctrine. At the same time they will be found bewailing the demise of sodomy laws.*

### **The "sex thing" again**

Let me borrow an arrow from the Liberal quiver, Father, and ask you, what the hell do you, a celibate white male, know about sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular? In my opinion, much less than what other male celibate priests who hold to the Church's traditional teaching know.

Again, do you remember ever taking an oath of obedience to the Church before or during your ordination? What good did it do?

*The Neocaths are very quick to denounce liberal Catholics as heretics. Authority looms very large in their mental world, and is indeed its dominant theme. However, authoritative documents, or early utterances of Joseph Ratzinger, that go against their reactionary convictions will be whittled away. This is notably true of Dignitatis Humanae and Gaudium et Spes.*

Perhaps we like and respect Papa Ratzinger better because he dared to grow up, while you are still a flower boy at heart, Father.

*The Neocaths believe strongly in Hell, and play down the views of Von Balthasar and John Paul II that we may hope the Hell is empty. They insist on the physical pain caused by hell fire. They invoke Hell against liberal or what they call "dissident" theologians and against those they consider sexually deviant.*

Father, if there is no hell, one might as well not be Catholic, Christian, or even a believer. Might as well be a noble pagan, an ethical atheist. Or, maybe a Nietzschean, yeah, a thorough nihilist in the pursuit power, money, and sex, while squashing the little people along the way. Yeah, what difference would it make? If there's no ultimate sanction for our actions, if there's no Beatific Vision or if that vision comes really cheap, Christ's death was superfluous and his resurrection, quite unnecessary. And if He didn't rise, then we believe in vain, as St. Paul said.

I would hope that Hell would be empty, but I know it isn't. It is populated by people who deny its existence, guided there by priests like you who should have known better.

### ***Political correctness is the bane of hypocrites***

*The Neocaths are joyfully uncharitable in their speech, trampling not only on political correctness but on the laws of libel.*

"Political correctness" is now a virtue? The libel accusation is serious. Can you provide some more detail or were you "shooting from the hip"?

*There is surely much more to be said about this social phenomenon. Its future evolution will be followed with interest. We can only hope that like the Neocon movement with which it has so much in common it will turn out to be an ephemeral excess.*

This sounds more like a final plea for relevance in a world that have dared move forward, while leaving Fr. O'Leary and his clique behind.

*Happily there is another side to John Paul II and his successor -- their concern for social justice and their ecumenical outreach -- which should ensure that the hothouse world of the Neocaths is not the future awaiting the Roman Catholic Church as a whole.*

Father, I want to drink a little bit of what your having. Just a little bit, for a taste only. Apparently continuous use has a terrible effect on one's neuron count.

Now, suddenly, in the eyes of Fr. O'Leary, Pope John Paul the Great is not a Mao-like figure, and Pope Benedict XVI is not a reactionary who betrayed his first youthful impulses. Now they have "another side" which he now applauds and hopes, against all hope, that the "Episcopaliation" of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, continue unabated into a glorious future when doctrine would be seen as a quaint yet dangerous and divisive relic, the Bible as inspiring mythology, and Christian morality as merely suggestive and not prescriptive; and the denial of the mystery of the Church as an object of faith. Thanks, but no thanks.

How the legacy of Pope John Paul and Benedict XVI would allow for that, Fr. O'Leary doesn't explain. It is left to us to either awaken Fr. O'Leary from his stupor, or, failing that, sidestep him while muttering a prayer for God to show him as much mercy as He shows us.

### ***Conclusion***

At last, we've reached the end of this serial post on Fr. Joseph O'Leary's essay. *The rise of the neocaths*. In this serial, I've strived to question every idea, sometimes single thoughts or fragments of thoughts—corresponding to paragraphs, sentences, and phrases respectively—that I considered deserving of deeper analysis. My purpose was not merely

to restate what Fr. O'Leary said, but also its implications, its contradictions, and the seeming mismatch between Fr. O'Leary's vocation as priest, and his avocation as theologian and philosopher. The latter are to support the former, and the former should suffuse the latter and yet, I don't see that happening.

Fr. O'Leary holds to theological and philosophical conclusions he shouldn't as a priest; his sacramental calling is in conflict with the insights he has gained elsewhere in his studies. Fr. O'Leary's ego—allow me to engage on some amateur psychoanalysis of my own—which is aware of the rift, has found his scholarly findings as having more sway over his intellect and will than the imperatives flowing from the sacramental paradigm he had adhered to since earlier in his life.

Fr. O'Leary's ego did what healthy egos do when confronting the choice between a healthy integration or disintegration, between absorption and individuation. Based upon the data facing him and his own subjective inclinations and tastes and particular interpretations of the data, he subordinated his priestly self to an interpretation of the findings that rewarded his reason at the expense his faith and once he achieved that, he has never let go. He individuated not as a priest who was an intellectual, but as an intellectual who happened to be a priest. (Not a bad analysis from a Neocath who, according to Fr. O'Leary, suffers from unresolved father-figure problems, wouldn't you say?). Also, consider the following:

For some, faith precedes reason even if it ends in the negation of that very same reason. Tertullian, for example, used to say of the contents of his Christian faith *I believe because it is absurd*. His decisions later in life show that he followed this star to extreme conclusions, finishing his earthly pilgrimage outside of the Church. This current feeds some fundamentalists to the present day, as well as a few souls among fringe "traditionalists." That way lies Gerry Matatics, for example. Fr. O'Leary is not in this camp.

For other people, reason has achieved precedence over faith in their minds. In this scenario, in the inner dialogue every man and woman of faith has within their selves, they have reached a decision that circumscribed the assumptions and demands of faith into a tight little circle within their volitions and worldview to the point faith became more of a *feeling* and less of a sense of *knowledge*. Persons in this camp grant a higher status to those conclusions reached through the inductive method of empirical science than to the unseen facts of faith reached by contemplation and study of the Deposit of Faith.

Why? These religious scholars believe that the insights of empirical science have theological consequences; they believe that in his own way, the scientist is **theologizing**.

The French scientist-theologian, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, held this belief, in my opinion. Devotees of his *process theology*—for which Fr. O'Leary has expressed admiration—hold the scientific method in high regard and in practice, they do not distinguish between God's natural and supernatural actions in the world. To them, a rainbow is as much a miracle as the multiplication of bread and fish, perhaps even more

so, because it can both explained and measured and also appreciated aesthetically first-hand, whereas the miracle of multiplication of bread may be but a mythical story that accreted into the Gospel narrative by a well-meaning writer who was not a first-hand witness to the event. They shifted the meaning of ultimate things from revelation to cogitation.

The converse is not true: a theologian is not doing science, nor is a theological conclusion one that can be tested empirically. Therefore, according to this view, theologians are handicapped in their conclusions unless they bring the "higher theology" of empirical science to bear upon a given problem.

This approach satisfies many of the demands of unaided reason. In this scheme, faith is totally drained of his objective contents and subordinated to the findings of empirical science; faith only becomes "knowledge" to the extent it is informed by scientific findings, otherwise it is deemed "irrational."

Emptying faith from its objective contents leads to another practical result: no Magisterium is needed to examine, protect, and define the contents of such faith. At best, the Magisterium's job becomes merely consultative and no more binding than the word of any single talented theologian, whether ordained or not. At worst, the Magisterium may be seen as the jealous protector of obsolete metanarratives that justify the oppression of misunderstood minorities and impede the evolutionary process of belief, doctrine, worship, and church government toward its natural end—the Omega point, de Chardin would have called it. Hence, the perceived obligation by members of this camp to deconstruct and minimize all Magisterial claims to dogmatic and jurisdictional authority.

This is where, I believe, Fr. O'Leary stands. That's why he decries the Neocaths' countercultural stances in matters of sex, church authority, morality and the like. Our stance is irrational, in Fr. O'Leary's eyes, because we refuse to be informed by the higher findings of empirical science which, within the Teilhardian scheme, is but a higher way of theologizing. We refuse to empty faith of its objective content and would not abandon the certainty of our faith-based knowledge in favor of a better kind of knowledge of the scientific-empirical kind. This is a form of Gnosticism. Fr. O'Leary is a Gnostic! He just hasn't realized it yet.

In contrast, Neocaths stand with the Church and with the Church's greatest theologians, on the view of the appropriate relationship between faith and reason. Faith enjoys preeminence because it is infused directly by God and it is independent from any feeling or act of the will prior to this infusion. Once God freely infuses faith upon a person—ordinarily through Baptism—faith and reason enters into a dialogue, within their proper boundaries that preserve the independence and mutual interdependence of each knowledge domain.

Catholics—let us drop the "neo" prefix, please, for it is really meaningless—do not believe "because it is absurd," but because it is *reasonable*, even if judgment and understanding many times have to be temporarily suspended—not denied—while "the

certainty of things not seen" is cultivated and contemplated as true, objective, albeit not empirical, "knowledge." Hence, a Catholic should know that God is Triune, with the same certainty that he or she knows that an object once released from one's hands would fall to the ground, although the reality of the Trinity lies beyond personal experience and once engaged in an I-Thou relationship, the relationship transcends any previous personal experience of created beings. That this is often is not the case is a tragedy.

Once again, "faith" is the **certainty** of things not seen, as the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews said (cf. Hebrews 11;1). Judging by his essay, *The rise of the neocaths*, Fr. O'Leary lacks this certainty and wishes everyone to be short of it too.

Fr. O'Leary has failed to understand Catholics, let alone explain away those of our idiosyncrasies that seem to grate him so much. He insulted the late Pope John Paul the Great and doesn't expect much from Pope Benedict XVI either. Fr. O'Leary has drawn an elaborate caricature that he is attempting to pass as true.

Our duty remains to define ourselves as Catholics in word and action, and let Fr. O'Leary and those in his camp to kick hard against the goads until they turn blue on their faces. Perhaps then, he might repent, and the Lord may heal him. I know this is possible first hand, for the Lord has dealt with me in this manner and if he deals thusly with me, why not with a priest who is, by virtue of his ordination, *imago Christi*? For I have one good thing to say about Fr. O'Leary and is that he is a priest, and that goes a long way with me. May the grace of his ordination fill him and conform him perfectly to the image of Christ and restore in him a filial obedience to Holy Mother Church.

*Finis. Deo gratias.*