# A MORE EXCELLENT WAY

## Description

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**George Weigel, *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st Century Church* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).**

No one doubts the need for deep reform in the Church, but few agree on how to go about it. George Weigel, one of our foremost Catholic intellectuals, offers a comprehensive reform proposal transcending the liberal and conservative labels that have obscured Catholic thought for decades. While Weigel calls this program "Evangelical Catholicism," he notes that it's not *his* program, but *the Church*'*s*. The book is divided into two parts. The first presents the Evangelical Catholic vision in full, while the second gives details for actual reform.

Some might find the title a bit misleading. It has nothing whatever to do with Evangelical Protestantism, but it has much to do with the "New Evangelization" called for by Popes Blessed John Paul II and Benedict XVI, which seeks to re-Christianize a secularized world. Evangelical Catholicism is a new term denoting an ancient task: as St. Pius X put it, "to restore all things in Christ." The two pillars of Evangelical Catholicism are Word and Sacrament, and its criteria are Truth (with a capital "T") and Mission (with a capital "M").

Today Christianity risks being reduced to "a private lifestyle of no political consequence." Weigel cites "soft totalitarianism": the state's attempt to redefine the basic meaning of both humanity and marriage, undermining "the social and cultural foundations of democracy." In Canada, for example, "human rights commissions" and "human rights tribunals" fine pastors invoking the biblical understanding of marriage. The "gay marriage" movement, Weigel writes, is "nothing less than an effort to redefine human nature through the use of state power, if necessary."

Neither "progressive" nor "traditionalist" Catholicism, Weigel contends, are equipped to meet this challenge. Faced with religious relativism, the former sees Catholicism "as one possible story—one possible truth—in a pluralistic world of truths and 'narratives,' none of which can claim the mantle of certainty." The latter "denies the reality of the conditions under which the Gospel must be proclaimed in the twenty-first century—and thus renders itself evangelically sterile…" In short, one group wants to tighten up the rules; the other wants to loosen them.

Both are caught up in an outdated model, that of the Counter-Reformation. Based on a catechetical-devotional approach, this model worked well in the aftermath of the Reformation, but fell apart under what Weigel calls the "acids of modernity." Today believers face what one Jewish legal scholar terms "Christophobia." What is needed, Weigel suggests, is a bold, fresh approach providing the tools to evangelize, to begin a dialogue with modernity that doesn't water down essential Catholic truths.

Vatican II called for that dialogue, along with a "radical reorientation of the Church to the Gospel." The council was no radical break with the past. Weigel reassesses the pontificate of Leo XIII (1878- 1903)

and his influence on the council. In his attempt to bring a Catholic voice to bear in all areas of modern life, from the social to the intellectual, Leo and his successors actually paved the way for Vatican II.

When Pope Blessed Pius IX died, Weigel writes, “many European statesmen and intellectuals imagined the papacy, and by extension, the Catholic Church—to be finished as a force in human affairs.” One of the keynotes of Pius’ later years was a “blanket, antimodern rejectionism” of the secular world, as seen in his 1864 *Syllabus of Errors*, which had condemned the notion that “The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with, progress, liberalism and modern civilization.”

Leo aimed to build “a distinctive Catholic intellectual engagement with modernity.” He made Aquinas the cornerstone for Catholic intellectual life; he encouraged Biblical studies at a time when modern scholarship was eliminating the faith factor; he laid the foundation for modern Catholic social thought with *Rerum Novarum* (1891). As a professional diplomat he kept the lines of communication open with France’s Third Republic rather than simply condemn its anticlerical tendencies. Weigel sees Leo’s approach memorialized in the statue above his tomb:

“[T]he statue of Leo XIII depicts the Pope standing upright, right arm extended and foot thrust forward, as if inviting the world into a serious conversation about the human prospect—as if leading the Church out of the past and into a new, confident, evangelical future.”

This task involves the entire Body of Christ. It begins by encountering the person of Jesus Christ in the Gospel and growing in His friendship. Weigel adds: “You are not a Catholic in the full sense of the term because your grandmother was born in County Cork or Palermo or Guadalajara… You are a Catholic because you have met the Lord Jesus and entered into a mature friendship with Him.”

Evangelical Catholicism calls for, as St. Paul says, a “more excellent way” than a concessionary, nostalgic or lukewarm approach. “The lay vocation,” Weigel writes, “is evangelism: of the family, the workplace, and the neighborhood, and thus of culture, economics, and politics.” Evangelical Catholicism, in short, is a culture that “seeks to be a culture-forming counterculture for the sake of the world, its healing, and its conversion.”

In discussing specific reform measures, Weigel is always idealistic but never impractical. In his chapter on episcopal reform, he calls for a greater balance in implementing the bishop’s office of teaching, sanctifying and governing. Too often, he contends, the teaching aspect has been underemphasized. While the Vatican has moved quickly on bishops who have created “financial shambles” in their dioceses, he asks, “But what of doctrinal shambles? What of disciplinary shambles?”

Weigel correctly notes that men who never should have been ordained priests “slipped through a seminary system that had, from the late 1960’s through the late 1980’s, looked more to psychology and psychiatry than to moral theology and sacramental theology in dealing with aberrant personalities and grave sins.” Fidelity and a deeper conversion to Christ the High Priest, he argues, are essential components of any clerical reform. A celibacy, albeit one bereft of clericalism, is more needed than ever to challenge the “self-absorption of post-modernity.”

With regard to liturgical reform, Weigel calls for a liturgy that “is not focused on itself,” and he suggests a literal reorientation of the priest and people *ad orientem* might help in this regard:

“Does the now conventional, but hardly traditional, priest-facing-people-over-the-altar orientation contribute, however unintentionally, to a loss of the congregation’s self-awareness as God’s people on pilgrimage through history toward the fulfillment of God’s promises?”

He calls for a greater focus on the church building as sacred space. He also calls for a “great cleansing of hymnals and missalettes,” taking for example a popular postconciliar hymn, “Love One Another.” “Who,” he asks, “is praying to whom?” Rather than calling for a return to the preconciliar Mass, Weigel argues for “a more dignified celebration of the Novus Ordo.”

For Weigel, a major aspect of deep reform has to include the religious orders, but he observes that many of them have fallen into what he calls a “psychological schism.” While they didn’t formally leave the Church, they had “no affective connection to the institutional Church and its supreme authority.” While Rome’s approach seems to be “one of letting them die a natural death,” Weigel wonders if this approach isn’t a major impediment to the New Evangelization.

For a long time, religious were predominant in Catholic education, healthcare and charitable work. Today laypeople have taken over this work and in many cases have proven more faithful to preserving Catholic identity and mission. Whatever their field of work, they need to see themselves as missionaries; “Lay Catholics do not need anyone’s permission to be the evangelical witnesses they were called to be: to be an evangelist is a baptismal obligation, not a privilege conceded by ecclesiastical authority.” How they live should be “counter-cultural in the twenty-first century.”

An important part of Evangelical Catholic reform is in the Catholic intellectual life. Catholic higher education in particular must reject “the post-modern subjectivism that speaks only of ‘your truth’ and ‘my truth,’ confident in the conviction that every genuine search for truth eventually leads to the Truth who is God the Holy Trinity.” There’s also the question of how faithful to the Catholic intellectual mission some schools are:

“Catholic universities that sponsor productions of the Vagina Monologues and whose student-life offices encourage LGBTQ clubs, but which do not require their students to take courses in Augustine and Aquinas, or to read and absorb… key documents of Vatican II… have not begun to grasp the unique nature and mission of a Catholic institution of higher education.”

While Weigel praises the work being done at schools like the University of Dallas, still there may come a point where there’s little hope to reclaim Catholic identity. In this case, the local bishop may have to step in and declare that a certain college or university is no longer Catholic.

The Church’s role in public life is an urgent issue as modern society increasingly measures humans by their utility rather than their dignity. Nihilism, skepticism and moral relativism all serve to “erode the very foundation of the democratic project.” Secularism has strongly affected the Church’s work in this area, where, Weigel writes, “two generations of ineffective catechesis… have produced many Catholic politicians who are baptized pagans.” Weigel suggests here an intensified focus on educating the Catholic people, a task more necessary than ever in an increasingly secularized age.

Today he sees a “far more evangelically assertive model of the papacy, a model in which the Bishop of Rome is, above all, the Church’s first witness.” Among the qualities he lists for a potential pope are resilience, good judgment, strategic vision, courage and pastoral experience. He also calls for a

reassessment of the Curia's performance in the light of how they contribute to the Evangelical Catholic mission.

*Catalyst* readers will surely enjoy this highly readable work: bold and apologetic, but never apologizing.

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1. Book Review
2. Catalyst

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