

ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE



A CATHOLIC CHURCH
FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Louis DeThomasis, FSC

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for the Twenty-First Century*

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Louis DeThomas, FSC

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in extenso

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INTRODUCTION

Still Christ's Church, But Reimagined for Today

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*I have become all things to all people,
that I might by all means save some.
I do it all for the sake of the gospel,
so that I may share in its blessings.*

1 CORINTHIANS 9:22-23, NRSV

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Paul's description of himself as a follower and evangelizer of Jesus Christ is someone who becomes "all things to all people...for the sake of the gospel." That's right. According to Paul, to do anything less is not giving our all. Therefore, even two thousand years later, the church, its leaders, and all of Jesus' followers must be held to this difficult standard. Nothing less than becoming "all things to all people" is acceptable.

Becoming "all things to all people," however, isn't obvious or easy. In some ways it smacks of moral relativism or cafeteria Catholicism, two of the biggest bugaboos in the church today. In some ways, it is so difficult to accomplish that it seems easier just to do the opposite: State the truth as we know it as absolute and let the chips fall where they may. It seems that even Paul struggled with this "all things to all people" approach, but he did it "for the sake of the Gospel."



And so, my friends, must we. If someone needs us to be conservative, we must be conservative. If they need moderation, we must be right smack in the middle. If they need progressive, then progressive we will be.



Even if at times the observations that follow may seem quite critical (or certainly at least impolitic or undiplomatic, given the clashes and tensions in the church today) I think it's about time that the People of God find the courage to speak *out* to all Jesus' followers and to all people of good faith, and to speak *up* to all institutional church leaders forcefully, although always with Christian love. Love for the church does not preclude criticism of or about the church. If we are to become "one" in the church (as we pray every day in the Creed), it seems to me to be indisputable—whether we are conservative, mod-

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There are just too many in the church today who still believe that they have a monopoly on what is the "one true church."

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erate, or progressive by nature—that we desperately need to increase our knowledge and understanding of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, in a caring, supportive, and loving Christian spirit.

It is unfortunate that we do not seem to have that spirit now, even in the gently challenging pontificate of Pope Francis. There are just too many in the church today who still believe that they have a monopoly on what is the "one true church." And yes, as you read this

book I can understand if you contend that my directness makes me guilty of that same monopolistic spirit. My hope, though, is that you will not confuse my criticisms for disrespect but rather see them as my desire to encourage honesty, reverence, and loyalty in the Catholic Church that I have been honored to be part of my entire life and that I still serve as a De LaSalle Christian Brother.

I state from the outset that I am firmly convinced that the problem for the church today is not that there are those who are conservative and those who

are moderates and those who are progressive. When in the two-thousand-year history of the church was there unanimity of thought and persuasion among the faithful or even the hierarchy? My reading is that the serious difficulties the church finds itself in today are because of the fringe ideologues on both sides. (By the way, that is the same problem in other faith traditions also, and that is the cause of the current horrors of terrorism under the waving banners of “We Know God’s Will and You Don’t.”)

When people honestly seek knowledge and understanding about the Catholic Church and the Christian faith, often times there can be good, deep, and sustained (heated?) debate. Though unintended, there can also enter into that debate some inevitable confusion, questioning, and doubt. Bewilderment often becomes apparent when this discussion takes place between academic theologians and interested and concerned Catholics who are not professional theologians.



Today, however, there are many professional theologians who reflect Pope Francis’ insight that he shared in 2015 to the theology faculty on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina: “The good theologians, like the good shepherds, smell of the people and of the road and, with their reflection, pour oil and wine on the wounds of humankind.” Yet when many of today’s theologians are responsive to the faithful by using sensitive, compassionate, and less rigid traditional theology to try to heal the “wounds of humankind,” they are criticized, condemned, even disciplined.

Even in this time of Pope Francis, church bureaucrats are still demanding orthodox loyalty oaths of teachers and staffs and are restricting Catholic colleges and high schools in their approaches as they respond to their students’ religious and spiritual concerns. The unintended result is that these students seek answers from sources outside the church and the Catholic schools. Such interference from the institutional church impedes professional, dedicated, and caring Catholic schoolteachers and professors from accompanying students on

their faith journeys in today's pluralistic and globalized world.

In my recent book, *The Dynamics of Catholic Education: Letting the Catholic School Be School*, I observed: “The institutional church, for its part, must extend its encouragement and support to the Catholic school with the same understanding that it has publicly professed when it mandates that we should teach as Jesus did, who said: ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me’” (Mark 9:37, NRSV).

Even though many theologians and teachers are placed in an untenable position by tension between what is allowed and what they know needs to be said, the situation continues to persist. This friction is especially prevalent for those who have adapted modern day scientific knowledge and insights into their writings and integrated Pope Francis’ more pastoral approach into their theological presentations.

It is proper and considerate that we all turn off our cell phones when we enter a church, but it should not be mandatory for us to turn off our brains as well. Perhaps, we should all heed the advice of Zachary R. Dehm, who wrote in the *National Catholic Reporter’s* “Young Voices” column (November 6, 2014):

Theologians need strangers. If we do not engage strangers in theological discussion, we limit ourselves to only engaging other professional theologians. We insulate theology in the comfortable walls of our vocabulary and ideas. Without constant connection to those living the Christian (or non-Christian) life through their own vocation, we lose contact with the subject of our theologizing. We lose a fundamental perspective for doing theology, which we need if we are going to do our task well. To do good theology, we have to be willing to talk to strangers, even when the universe brings them to us randomly and without invitation.



I write this book not as a professional theologian—which I am not—but as a faithful member of the church I love. It is my belief that more than ever in

the church there is still a significant and more urgent need to transform how we are a church today in a world that has seen a globalized transformation of people and societies. We must become all things to all people, and people are more varied today than they were even at the time of the Second Vatican Council. More and more people—especially young people—are judging that many of the current leaders in the church, even those supporting Pope Francis’ efforts, simply refuse to transform their ways so they can protect the status quo, including their powers and perks of office.

An observation (NCR, Nov. 14, 2014) by Thomas Reese, SJ, about the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ November 2014 Baltimore meeting gives us an insight into why we must continue and repeat a call for transformation in the Catholic Church. Father Reese wrote:

A lack of passion and leadership marked the meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops this week in Baltimore. Their agenda was stale and did not reflect the excitement that Pope Francis’ papacy has generated.

A big part of the trouble with the American hierarchy is that the bishops have no one to consult. The conservative theologians, who have been advising them during the last two papacies, are as upset as the ideologically conservative bishops. Since progressive theologians were labeled heretics, kicked out of seminaries, and shunned like Ebola patients, bishops have no one to explain to them how to thrive with the discussion and debate being encouraged by Francis.



In the opening to this Introduction, I chose an essential insight into the nature of Christianity that Paul shared with the faithful: “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.” A poignant understanding of the richness and power of that same passage is well captured in the wonderful modern Scripture translation by Eugene Peterson:

Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized—whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be in on it!

1 Corinthians 9:19-25, *The Message*

As a longstanding member of the De LaSalle Christian Brothers; as one who is striving with all my imperfections, sins, and shortcomings to become a more dedicated and committed faithful follower of Jesus Christ; and as a proud and loyal member of the Catholic Church—I feel compelled to be honest and share with you my concerns and my dreams for the church I love. I, too, want “to be in on” this important discussion about the future of the church, and in doing so I believe it is essential that I try to speak to everyone, for everyone, and about everyone in the true spirit of Paul's declaration.

This necessarily compels me to be candid and honest about my interpretations as to what I see happening in our church today. I write this book trying to, in the words of *The Message*, “become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized....” I am totally prepared to accept that not all will agree with what I am saying, but I will “attempt to be all things to all people” so that no one will be confused as to what I am saying.

In a recent book I co-authored with Sister Cynthia Nienhaus, CSA, *The Silent Schism: Healing the Serious Split in the Catholic Church*, we stated that all of the faithful through the power of the Holy Spirit are called to be prophets in the sense that we must make Jesus' words of two thousand years ago meaningful for us today. But to do this, we wrote:

As the prophetic People of God, we must be there for the saints and the sinners; for the orthodox and the unorthodox; for the married and the divorced; for the straights and the gays; for the conservatives and the liberals; for the women who, in the sanctity of their conscience, believe they are called to be priests and deacons in the Catholic church. We must stand on the side of the oppressed, just as Jesus always did.



I do not see my contribution to this dialogue as something frivolous or without purpose. I take seriously the idea of visions and dreams as revealed in the Old Testament in Numbers 12:6: “Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams.”

Please understand that in no manner am I suggesting that I am a prophet. (In fact, if you were to ask my confreres in the De LaSalle Brothers, they would have many choice words to describe me, and none of those descriptors would even begin with the letter “p.”) But I am convinced that many of the faithful today are seeing visions and having dreams of a more inclusive, welcoming, and relevant church. Together, we are all prophets of a new heaven and a new earth. Together we see visions. Together we have dreams. This book is an attempt to unfold and reveal those graced visions. I believe that the faithful must share our dreams and visions of the future church. I dream of a future church that includes all; a church that accepts each person at the point that each stands on his or her spiritual journey; a church that understands the real struggles and doubts of all people.

Louis DeThomasis, FSC, PhD
Rome, Italy
Easter Sunday 2016

CHAPTER 1

A Small Word, But with a Big Impact

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*“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’
For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”*

MATTHEW 9:12-13, NRSV

• • • • •

The small word—*but*—can make all the difference when we try to understand what people mean when they attempt to tell us something, especially something important, even life-changing. It is not an insignificant three-letter word that merely fills in a brief pause in a sentence. *But* has distinctive meanings depending on how it is used in a sentence. Many times it clarifies an entire thought or idea.

For example, in the words from the Gospel of Matthew above, Jesus is driving home to his disciples (us) that his ministry, his mission, his vocation, his very purpose, was to reach out to those who are estranged from God, not to those who are right with God. Eugene Peterson translates the passage this way:

“Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? Go figure out what this Scripture means: ‘I’m after mercy, not religion.’ I’m here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders.”

Matthew 9:12-13, *The Message*



If you survey various dictionaries and word-source reference materials, you will see many meanings and uses for the word *but* (and its longer cousin, *however*). At times *but* is used as a conjunction in a sentence and conveys a sense of “yet,” “except,” “unless,” “otherwise,” etc. For instance: *She was so sad that she could do nothing but pray for a better life*. Sometimes *but* can be used as a preposition and convey the idea of an exception. An example would be: *No one follows the rules but me*. The word *but* may also be used as an adverb, as in: *There is but one God*. Or as a noun, as in: *Follow the rules, and no buts about it*.

In essence *but* commonly conveys something that is either in opposition or contrast to something else. It highlights an idea that signals to the listener “in spite of” or “nevertheless” or something “further” that must be understood. It implies there is another item that is equally true or an additional point that must certainly be taken into consideration. For instance: *I am leaving, but I will return*.



Because of the nuanced understandings of this small three-letter word, it is intriguing to explore its significance on the dynamics of the Catholic faith today.

Should today’s church, the current People of God (as we call ourselves) see a graced potentiality for a better understanding of the Word of God when we explore how *but* is used in Scripture? Does this small word have the power to light up the horizons of Christianity for the twenty-first century, helping us to discern the whole truth, spirit and beauty of Jesus’ Good News? In other words, when we read the Bible or study theology, does it impose on us a sense of a rigid, unequivocal, and permanent set of facts being legislated or does it announce a living, transforming, expansive spiritual truth?

For example, when we reflect on Jesus as he ushered into the world the

Good News of our salvation, are we not in awe that he was as human as you or me but still, as Catholics believe, was so intertwined with the reality of his Father in heaven that he himself was divine? The Catholic faith teaches that Jesus was not just pretending to be human but was truly God and truly human. That's a truth of our faith, but it is not a scientifically verifiable fact. (You can see that just in this paragraph, without the use of the word *but* we Catholics could not adequately explain some of the basic truths of our faith.)



So, here we are. Even though there are volumes upon volumes of theological, philosophical, doctrinal, catechetical, and dogmatic texts explaining Jesus and his message, we know that no amount of words or human reasoning can capture his reality and meaning for today. Without that little word *but*, we can never fully understand the truth of who Jesus really was, and continues to be, for us.

When Catholics and other Christians proclaim in the Nicene Creed that “We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church,” we are saying that for over two thousand years the church—in spite of the weaknesses, mistakes, and scandals—is truly one, holy, catholic (note the small “c”), and apostolic, but we also know there have always been sinners inside the church. Without that wonderful word *but*, we can never fully explain this mystery.

I am not saying that attempts to explain the doctrine and dogma of the faith should be relative (one the one hand, but on the other hand). To the contrary, I am saying that it is only by using the word *but* that we can adequately be “all things to all people.” Let’s not kid ourselves. (We are certainly not fooling anyone else!) We Catholics must completely acknowledge that no one person (even the pope), no magisterium, no curia, no bishop, and no theology will ever be able to fully explain the Good News in terms of verifiable human/scientific facts. At Mass, we Catholics proclaim what we call *the Mystery of Faith*: “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” This can only be understood as a paradox and a metaphor. Therefore, should not our doctrines,

dogma, rules, and pronouncements also reflect this truth of our faith? We are a church reliant on the word *but* to explain our beliefs.

It is the Holy Spirit, inspiring the People of God over time, who reveals to the faithful the endless and evolving truth of the divine mystery—not scientific formulas, facts, doctrines, and rules. Let us not forget even St. Thomas Aquinas observed. “Life itself is prior to doctrine.”



Do we have to remind ourselves of one of the most famous historical blunders of the church, one in which it confused scientific facts with the deeper truth of the faith? It was the Roman Inquisition in 1615 that forbade Galileo Galilei to advocate the scientific fact of *heliocentrism*, i.e., that the earth revolved around the sun. The church at the time taught that the earth was the center of the universe and that all heavenly bodies revolved around the earth. The Inquisition insisted that if Galileo did not agree with the facts that they taught he would be declared a heretic. Galileo, facing torture, recanted. (Galileo was quoted to have said privately on his way out of the trial, “And yet it moves,” referring to the planet Earth.)

Jesus’ attitude toward people who, like Galileo, are not considered compliant to authority’s version of the facts is quite different. At the opening of this chapter I recalled the verse in Matthew 9 that involved the incident when the Pharisees saw Jesus eating in Matthew’s house and they questioned the disciples why their teacher ate with tax collectors and sinners. This seemed to annoy Jesus, and he responded, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Matthew 9:12-13, *NRSV*).



Richard Beck, a psychologist who insightfully interfaces social psychology with theology, wrote *Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality, and Morality*. Using his extensive research on everyday human experiences, he thoughtfully presents fascinating theological reflection on the statement in Matthew 9:13 “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

Beck takes as his foundation for his observations the works of Walter Brueggemann and Fernando Belo and their research on the two prevalent yet

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*There is no doubt
where Jesus stands....
His God demands
inclusion of all, not
exclusion of anyone.*

.....

antagonistic visions at that time in Israel’s history, i.e. the understanding of “uprightness before God.” The two opposing forces were: (1) the Levitical or “priestly vision,” and (2) the Prophetic or “justice vision.” The Levitical direction of “uprightness before God” emphasized the necessity for cultic purity for all and gave very detailed rules for how people were to act in almost every situation. However, the Prophetic approach focused on concern and care for the poor, the needy, and the marginalized. Before Jesus comes on the scene, these two

opposing views of life were continuously present, resulting in much animosity among the Jewish faithful (sound familiar?).

Now comes Jesus, who was being severely criticized by the Pharisees for mingling, associating, and even eating with the despised tax collectors and sinners. After reading Matthew 9, there is no doubt where Jesus stands on the Levitical-Prophetic divide. His God demands *inclusion* of all, not *exclusion* of anyone. Jesus makes clear the unequivocal Christian message by opting for the Prophetic vision of Judaism. To follow him means that no one—especially the sinner—is to be looked upon with disgust. All of us are embraced in the unconditional love of the Lord. That’s the Christian truth, one that no doctrinal words or facts will ever be able to fully explain.

In an interview with Chris Keller published in *The Other Journal: An Intersection of Theology and Culture* on February 16, 2012, Beck had a powerful and pointed observation to make about this when he said:

Here's how all this plays out psychologically: My sense is that a lot of churches think they can have it both ways. You often see this in the common refrain "love the sinner but hate the sin." The psychological research I review in Unclean suggests that this maxim is almost impossible to put into practice. Psychologically speaking, mercy and purity pull us in opposite directions. And behaviorally, as we see in Matthew 9, we have to make a choice: follow Jesus as he crosses the purity boundary or stand with the Pharisees who have opted for quarantine.

Without Jesus using that short, innocent-looking word *but* when bluntly telling the Pharisees that he, the Son of God, came to earth not just for the righteous but the sinner, what chance would any of us have for salvation? That simple, single "but" uttered by Jesus captures and embraces the mystery of the Catholic faith.

Facts and truths are simply not the same thing. Niels Bohr, a 1922 winner of the Nobel Prize for Physics, captured this distinction when he insightfully observed: "*The opposite of a fact is falsehood, but the opposite of one profound truth may very well be another profound truth.*"

Truth is a reality that is not simply understood with data. It must be discovered, lived, revealed. In the theological sense, truth involves a fundamental and transcendent reality that goes beyond any theology, philosophy, or laws.

No human controls, and no church authority, can stop the revelation of truth about God and the church. Human words, doctrines, or canons of laws are not the keys that open the doors to sanctity; rather, it is our personal experience and relationship with the Lord, encountered within our hearts and imaginations.

It is not in the recitation of words in prayers that makes us holy, but rather it is living a prayerful life, i.e. a life animated by living in the presence of the one true God and acting with love in all that we do.

I dream of a church that embraces the truth that the Holy Spirit inspires all the faithful to discern God's will. I dream that the Holy Spirit's inspiration will make us all free to bring our doubts, disagreements, and questions to the conversation. Jesus always calls us to "Come follow me," not "Come obey my rules."

"BUT" IS SUCH A BEAUTIFUL (AND POWERFUL) WORD

The word *but* was used by Jesus often to clarify to his disciples how his teaching was different from the conventional wisdom of the time: "But I say to you..." This was never more true than when he was speaking about how the disciples (right up to today) were to act toward one another and toward those outside their group. Louis DeThomasis, a well-respected De La Salle Christian Brother and President Emeritus of St. Mary's University of Minnesota, uses this method of Jesus to look at the Catholic Church today and how it must change if it is to carry out the mission it has been given by its founder. "Even if at times the observations in this book may seem quite critical (or certainly at least impolitic or undiplomatic, given the clashes and tensions in the church today)," he insists, "I think it's about time that the People of God find the courage to speak *out* to all Jesus' followers and to all people of good faith, and to speak *up* to all institutional church leaders forcefully, although always with Christian love. Love for the church does not preclude criticism of or about the church. If we are to become 'one' in the church (as we pray every day in the Creed), it seems to me to be indisputable—whether we are conservative, moderate, or progressive by nature—that we desperately need to increase our knowledge and understanding of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, in a caring, supportive, and loving Christian spirit."

"I state from the outset," he says in his Introduction, "that I am firmly convinced that the problem for the church today is not that there are those who are conservative and those who are moderates and those who are progressive. When in the two thousand year history of the church was there unanimity of thought and persuasion among the faithful or even the hierarchy? My reading is that the serious difficulties the church finds itself in today are because of the fringe ideologues on both sides."

So, buckle up for an old-fashioned but good-spirited Catholic brawl about the future of the Catholic Church in the twenty-first century. You may not agree with every one of Brother Louis' arguments, but they will cause you to think about what kind of a church we need and want... or, better yet, what kind of church Jesus wants us to be.

LOUIS DETHOMASIS, FSC, is currently the Chairman of the Christian Brothers Investment Services-Global. He has written several books, including *Flying in the Face of Tradition: Listening to the Lived Experience of the Faithful*, *The Dynamics of Christian Education: Letting the Catholic School Be School*, and (with Sr. Cynthia Nienhaus) *The Silent Schism: Healing the Serious Split in the Catholic Church*. Brother Louis is based in Rome but spends considerable time in the United States.



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