

Massimo Faggioli, *Sorting out Catholicism: A Brief History of the New Ecclesial Movements*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2014. Pp. 229, \$24.49.

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In 1983, I read *Os 'Movimentos' e Pastoral Latino-Americana*, a study of the “ecclesial movements” by the Belgian-Brazilian theologian and sociologist José Comblin. I was impressed by Comblin’s effort to inject logical, theological, and sociological “order” into the phenomenon of the Catholic new movements, situating them in a wider historical and theological-pastoral perspective. At the time, I thought that Comblin succeeded in mapping the major questions posed by the rise of this new phenomenon within the church.¹ When I met the author in Brussels in 1986, we

1. The most important ecclesial movements, in the order Faggioli cites them, include: Communion and Liberation, Opus Dei, the Community of Sant’Egidio, the Focolare Movement, the Neocatechumenal Way, the Cursillos de Cristianidad, the Regnum Christi Movement, and the Legionaries of Christ. Here, he does not mention

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had the opportunity to discuss further some of the points that had left me perplexed, and we agreed that only serious in-depth scholarly research could resolve these lingering questions. This was also the starting point for my doctoral research, a sociological study on the new intraecclesial movements with a particular focus on the Focolare Movement. One section, for the period 1943–1965, has been recently published.²

Over the course of this research, I have followed closely reflections on this topic in the field of sociology, as well as in history and theology. I first came into contact with the work of Massimo Faggioli through his 2008 study, *Breve storia dei movimenti cattolici*.³ Although there are points on which I think his analysis in that book could have been more thorough, I was impressed by the depth of scholarship emerging from his contact with the so-called Bologna school of Alberigo and Melloni. For these reasons, my curiosity was piqued in seeing the American edition, which includes new material that resulted from further reflections following the 2008 study.

Faggioli seems not to know Comblin’s earlier analysis, which in the 1980s had already developed—often brilliantly—some of

the Schoenstatt Movement, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, and l’Arche (of Jean Vanier), which also belong to the same general category of new ecclesial Catholic movements.

2. Published in the prestigious *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* (1983): 239–67.

3. Massimo Faggioli, *Breve storia dei movimenti cattolici* (Rome: Carocci, 2008). The most sociologically relevant introductory study of the 1990s came from the well-known Louvain sociologist Karel Dobbelaere; see his “Binnenkerkelijke’ nieuwe religieuze bewegingen: Een sociologische verkenning van modern religieuze orientaties” [Inner-church New Religious Movements: A Sociological Exploration of Modern Religious Orientations], in *Vsiii en volharding*, edited by D.G.A. Koelega and H. Noordgraaf (Publivorm: Voorburg, 1991), 71–84.

the themes Faggioli explores. For example, Comblin argued that these new Catholic movements belonged to a second generation of lay people who followed the first generation whose active role in the Catholic Church is known as the Catholic Action (CA). In recounting this history, Faggioli, as an Italian theologian and historian, is at his best. But having resided in the United States since 2008, he is also aware that the history of the CA may be of less interest to the American reader. Comblin considered the elites of CA theologically more discerning than the lay elite of the new movements. Catholic Action had less impact on worldly themes, while the new movements include people embedded not only in the institutions of the church but also in a variety of social structures. The obvious explanation for this difference is that the clergy, who were pivotal in building the culture of CA, were the real elite for most of the history of CA in the twentieth century. In terms of church affairs, they often had a more sophisticated view than did the lay elite of the movements a generation later. The laypeople were less sensitive to the nuances of the theological debates of the times because their focus was on secular issues and not on theology. For Comblin, this history helps explain the perception that movements are conservative in their approach to church matters.

Faggioli also focuses on this question, exploring the links between the movements and the political ideologies of the twentieth century. Comblin focused on the movements in Brazil, particularly on its complex dynamic of church politics during the 1980s, when it seemed that the movements had bypassed the bishops and the local church, having more staff members, a multinational and not merely local character, and the capacity to mobilize competent laypeople—something that many poor dioceses in Latin America

could not match. Comblin's point was that these movements, which were rooted in Europe and the middle class,⁴ unintentionally evolved to contradict the pastoral line of the Latin American church, which was promoting the preferential option for the poor and Base Ecclesial Communities (BEC) supported by liberation theology, an ecclesial current that never really reached Europe or the United States. For sure, this Latin American approach to incarnating the Second Vatican Council was one of the most promising fruits of Vatican II, a real effort to enculturate the gospel in a distinctly non-European form. Comblin made the Brazilian church aware of the tension between these new religious multinationals and the policy of the local churches. Such tension was nothing new, Comblin noted, since religious orders in the past had also promoted pluralism in church affairs. This earlier work parallels one of Faggioli's principal points of analysis: the reception and implementation of Vatican II.

Up to this point, Faggioli's argument follows the same course Comblin took in 1983. But in his analysis of the relationship between the movements and the Second Vatican Council, Faggioli begins to articulate a new and important argument and his unique voice begins to emerge. The most interesting points in Faggioli's book are found in the chapters on the relationship between the movements and two post-conciliar popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. I look forward to the more thorough analysis of Pope

4. In a 1988 conversation I had in Rio de Janeiro with Leonardo Boff, he expressed his regrets about the relative failure of the BECs and liberation theology to engage the middle class in their struggle in favor of the poor. See my article with L. Bruni, "The Economy of Communion as a Charismatic Practice," in *Responsible Economics: E.F. Schumacher and His Legacy for the 21st Century*, edited by Hendrik Opdebeek (Oxford & New York: P. Lang, Berlin-Brussels, 2013), 297.

Francis and the movements in Faggioli's forthcoming book, *Pope Francis: Tradition in Translation*.⁵

Faggioli's central thesis is that "Today, world Catholicism is experiencing a particular historical moment in which the influence of Catholic movements is particularly strong" (x). He explains that this influence is "thanks to the new evangelization launched by Saint John Paul II, developed by Pope Benedict XVI, and reinvigorated by Pope Francis" (x). Faggioli affirms:

The central thesis of the book . . . [is] that the new ecclesial movements are one of the key experiences for understanding the complexity of the relationship between Catholicism and the modern world in the twentieth century and the relationship between the Second Vatican Council and the experience of the preconciliar and postconciliar Catholic Church and what this experience says about the hermeneutics of Vatican II. (x)

In his introductory pages, Faggioli establishes that "the phenomenon of the ecclesial movements is a key aspect of a larger issue at the core of the debate about the nature of Catholicism in a secular age" (xi). He defines this debate as an "engagement with the world or withdrawal from politics, inclusiveness and radical evangelism, social gospel and political homelessness" and presents his book as "a brief history of different answers to those questions" (xi). He then describes the history of the new ecclesial movements and their long march, as he sees it, from the periphery to the center of the church system, principally under John Paul II. He

sketches the relationship under John Paul II between the papacy and the movements, which became pivotal in the lived experience of Catholicism. The movements' influence in some ways was even more powerful than that of the bishops and local churches. He also situates most movements on the more conservative side of church politics, being less influenced by Vatican II than were the minor realities of "Catholic dissent."

What else can we learn from comparing Faggioli's work with Comblin's? Consider the evolution of Comblin's argument. In the 1980s, he was rather critical of the role of the new ecclesial movements even if he admired their dynamism. In the 1990s he changed his opinion, particularly of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal and Communion and Liberation, in part because of what he saw as a positive impact on Brazilian Catholics.⁶ In his eyes, these movements were responding to the needs of parts of the population that the Base Ecclesial Communities and liberation theology could not reach. In two articles published in 1999 and 2000, Clodovis and Leonardo Boff, the Brazilian representatives of liberation theology, expressed the opinion that the dichotomy between the charismatics and the BECs—namely, that "the first only pray and the latter only struggle"—was being bypassed at the grassroots level. Leonardo Boff illustrated a kind of *convergencia* in the practice of the laypeople engaged in both realities.

As a theologian and historian, Faggioli is more comfortable with analyzing the broad sweep of the situation in Italy. He sometimes appears conditioned by his knowledge concerning Communion and Liberation and Opus Dei. He compares the Neocatechumenal

6. I comment on this evolution in my "The Reception of CST and the 'Movimenti Phenomenon' in the Latin American Context: A Critical View," *Catholic Social Thought* (2013): 413–19.

5. *Pope Francis: Tradition in Translation* (New York: Paulist Press, forthcoming).

Way many times with the Community of Sant’Egidio and sometimes with the Focolare. I am not sure he is always accurate in these comparisons. His many interesting remarks, seemingly arising from conversations with specialists, suggest that, like Comblin’s, his perspective will continue to evolve. He is aware of the ambitious scope of his project and confesses more than once that his arguments lack nuance due to the movements’ diversity (211). He sometimes invokes a Weberian ideal-type approach, drawing sharp contrasts between two positions, although he seems to forget that in sociology, ideal types are intellectual constructs that do not exist in reality. But Faggioli’s formulations often suggest that they do. Scholarly work must establish the distance between the real historical subject and the ideal type. Distance and closeness require careful analysis that is not really possible in such a short overview of what remains a very complex subject. I found particularly interesting his chapter on the apologetics of “enmity,” his remarks on the Neo-Augustinian school, which stresses the contrast between the church and the world, and his chapter on inclusion and exclusion in the ecclesiology of the new Catholic movements. These are subjects that deserve greater elaboration. His ideal-typical approach risks stressing the contrast rather than the possibilities for *convergenzia*.

Only serious study and conversation on these subjects can bring new light here. I want to comment briefly on two quotes as examples of the sensibility I would like to see Faggioli develop. First:

Some [new ecclesial movements] actually have taken from Vatican II the basis for openness and rapprochement—either explicitly, as in the case of the Community of Sant’Egidio with its focus on the emergencies of poverty,

AIDS and ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, or in a more mediated manner, as in the case of the Focolare movement with its “path of dialogue” in the Church, between movements, including other churches, Judaism and other religions. (207)

Twenty-six pages earlier, he writes:

For still other movements (such as Focolare) the acceptance of the issues *ad extra* of Vatican II (ecumenism and interreligious dialogue) is not accompanied by the same enthusiasm in calling for more collegiality and structural reform in the Church. (181)

The point is not that Focolare does not share the same enthusiasm but that it stimulates collegiality and structural reform at the grassroots level without attracting public notice and without drawing attention to the recent substantial scholarly investigation of these themes. Recent scholarship, such as is found in this journal, appreciates that the Focolare’s influence is rooted in and firmly linked to profound insights drawn from the charisma of Chiara Lubich.⁷

In a similar vein, in his chapter 9, “New Catholic Movements and Priestly Formation in the Seminaries,” Faggioli suggests that the movements foster tension within the collegial church envisioned in Vatican II, particularly in terms of the relationship

7. See Piero Coda, “Erneuerung des synodalen bewusstseins im volk gottes,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* (2012): 103–120. See also J. C. Scannone, sj., “Il soggetto comunitaria nella spiritualita e mistica popolare,” *Civiltà Cattolica* (2015): 129 where he quotes Piero Coda and his contribution in a publication from the CELAM on Trinitarian anthropology as a fruit of the mystic Chiara Lubich.

“between the movements and the local bishops, especially when it comes to the seminaries” (151). He documents what he calls “new supra-local realities” such as Opus Dei’s Pontificia Università della Santa Croce in Rome; the Fraternità dei Missionari di San Carlo Borromeo, Communion and Liberation’s own community of priests; and the Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum in Rome of the Legionaries of Christ (152). He also documents the tension between Japanese bishops and the Redemptoris Mater seminary of the Neocatechumenal Way. With those, he includes the Focolare Movement’s Istituto Universitario Sophia. Whereas the others Faggioli cites are directly related to the traditional training and organization of priests, here he greatly misses the point: Sophia is a lay institution that draws primarily on lay students from around the world and stresses interdisciplinary study in such fields as economics, sociology, political science, and inter-religious studies studies, presenting them also with a solid biblical and theological approach.

In any case, this book, through an interdisciplinary approach that includes history, theology and sociology, marks a very interesting moment on the ongoing path toward a better understanding of the link between Catholicism today and the new ecclesial movements. In the end, Faggioli certainly does not “underestimate the great variety and complexity of this ecclesial galaxy, both internally and in terms of different geographical areas” (211). Having relinquished my scholarly devotion to this topic in the 1980s to invest many years of research in a single movement,⁸ I admire and applaud Faggioli’s desire to tackle this imposing but necessary

8. B. Callebaut, *Tradition, charisma et prophétie dans le Mouvement international des Focolari: Analyse sociologique* (Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 2010).

task. Trying to balance his critical analysis, Faggioli concludes: “The rise of the new ecclesial movements means undoubtedly a new wave of energy in the Catholic Church and new possibilities for lay Catholics to express spiritual gifts and ministerial roles in ways that were simply not thinkable only two generations ago. . . . These movements are a complex phenomenon that shapes the Church now more than before: not only members of the movements and Church leaders but also scholars of Catholicism need to understand it, because the new ecclesial movements play a key role for the future of Catholicism as a global community on all continents” (213).⁹ Faggioli stresses his position as an independent scholar, trying to avoid, on the one hand, the various “conspiracy theories” and, on the other, the acceptance at face value of the literature of the movements themselves. It will be interesting to see how Pope Francis might “reset” the ecclesiology of Vatican II and how this will influence the movements.

9. I have never forgotten a lesson I learned firsthand from the outstanding French sociologist and historian of recent Catholicism, Émile Poulat. He shared his conviction that the biggest Catholic conservative of the twentieth century is still far more modern than the most liberal Catholics of the eighteenth century!