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* Knights of Malta *

Chancellor's Update

April
2009

The Hermeneutic of Reform

The Correct Key To Interpretation and Application of the Second Vatican Council

(Address of Benedict XVI offering his Christmas greetings to the Roman Curia, Thursday, December 22, 2005)

Read the words of Our Holy Father very carefully and you will see the Beginning of the "Reform of the Reform"!

What has been the result of the Council (Second Vatican Council)? **Was it well received? What, in the acceptance of the Council, was good and what was inadequate or mistaken? What still remains to be done?** No one can deny that in vast areas of the Church the implementation of the Council has been somewhat difficult, even without wishing to apply to what occurred in these years the description that St. Basil, the great Doctor of the Church, made of the Church's situation after the Council of Nicea: He compares her situation to a naval battle in the darkness of the storm, saying among other things: "The raucous shouting of those who through disagreement rise up against one another, the incomprehensible chatter, the confused din of uninterrupted clamoring, has now filled almost the whole of the Church, falsifying through excess or failure the right doctrine of the faith..." (*De Spiritu Sancto*, XXX, 77; PG 32, 213 A; SCh 17 ff., p. 524).

We do not want to apply precisely this dramatic description to the situation of the post-conciliar period, yet something from all that occurred is nevertheless reflected in it. The question arises: **Why has the implementation of the Council, in large parts of the Church, thus far been so difficult?**

Well, it all depends **on the correct interpretation of the Council**, or - as we would say today - on its proper hermeneutics, the correct key to its interpretation and application. The problems in its implementation arose from the fact that two contrary hermeneutics came face to face and quarreled with each other. One caused confusion; the other, silently but more and more visibly, bore and is bearing fruit.

On the one hand, there is an interpretation that I would call "**a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture**"; **it has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media**, and also one trend of modern theology. On the other, there is the "hermeneutic of reform," of renewal in the continuity of the one subject - Church which the Lord has given to us. **She is a subject which increases in time and develops, yet always remains the same, the one subject of the journeying People of God.**

The hermeneutic of discontinuity risks ending in a split between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church. It asserts that the texts of the Council as such do not yet express the true spirit of the Council. It claims that they are the result of compromises in which, to reach unanimity, it was found necessary to keep and reconfirm many old things that are now pointless. However, the true spirit of the Council is not to be found in these compromises but instead in the impulses toward the new that are contained in the texts.

These innovations alone were supposed to represent the true spirit of the Council, and starting from and in conformity with them, it would be possible to move ahead. Precisely because the texts would only imperfectly reflect the true spirit of the Council and its newness, it would be necessary to go courageously beyond the texts and make room for the newness in which the Council's deepest intention would be expressed, even if it were still vague.

In a word: It would be necessary not to follow the texts of the Council but its spirit. In this way, obviously, a vast margin was left open for the question on how this spirit should subsequently be defined and room was consequently made for every whim.

The nature of a Council as such is therefore basically misunderstood. In this way, it is considered as a sort of constituent that eliminates an old constitution and creates a new one. However, the Constituent Assembly needs a mandator and then confirmation by the mandator - in other words, the people the constitution must serve. **The Fathers had no such mandate and no one had ever given them one;** nor could anyone have given them one because the essential constitution of the Church comes from the Lord and was given to us so that we might attain eternal life and, starting from this perspective, be able to illuminate life in time and time itself.

Through the sacrament they have received, bishops are stewards of the Lord's gift. They are "stewards of the mysteries of God" (I Cor 4: 1); as such, they must be found to be "faithful" and "wise" (cf. Lk 12:41-48). This requires them to administer the Lord's gift in the right way, so that it is not left concealed in some hiding place but bears fruit, and the Lord may end by saying to the administrator: "Since you were dependable in a small matter I will put you in charge of larger affairs" (cf. Mt 25:14-30; Lk 19:11-27).

These Gospel parables express the dynamic of fidelity required in the Lord's service; and through them it becomes clear that, as in a Council, the dynamic and fidelity must converge.

The hermeneutic of discontinuity is countered by the **hermeneutic of reform**, as it was presented first by Pope John XXIII in his speech inaugurating the Council on October 11, 1962, and later by Pope Paul VI in his Discourse for the Council's conclusion on December 7, 1965.

Here I shall cite only John XXIII's well-known words, which unequivocally express this hermeneutic when he says that the Council wishes **"to transmit the doctrine, pure and integral, without any attenuation or distortion."** And he continues: "Our duty is not only to guard this precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our era demands of us...." It is necessary that **"adherence to all the teaching of the Church in its entirety and preciseness..."** be presented in "faithful and perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another...." **retaining the same meaning and message** (*The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, S.J., p. 715).

It is clear that this commitment to expressing a specific truth in a new way demands new thinking on this truth and a new and vital relationship with it; it is also clear that new words can only develop if they come from an informed understanding of the truth expressed, and on the other hand, that a reflection on faith also requires that this faith be lived. In this regard, the program that Pope John XXIII proposed was extremely demanding, indeed, just as the synthesis of fidelity and dynamic is demanding.

However, wherever this interpretation guided the implementation of the Council, new life developed and new fruit ripened. Forty years after the Council, we can show that the positive is far greater and livelier than it appeared to be in the turbulent years around 1968. Today, we see that although the good seed developed slowly, it is nonetheless growing; and our deep gratitude for the work done by the Council is likewise growing. (Reprinted from [Inside the Vatican](#), March 2009- bold and color editor's emphasis)

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