

What Constitutes Authentic Church Renewal?

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The recent Common Ground Initiative, first conceived by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, has encouraged much discussion about the need for a new spirit of charitable dialogue in the church. The task we face in the church today is to become a community constituted by constructive and respectful dialogue. Such a community need not abandon the essentials of Christian faith. Dialogue does not always lead to agreement, neither does a lack of agreement signal the failure of dialogue. Rather dialogue must be seen as a privileged Christian *praxis*, if you will, in which all dialogue partners act in ways that reflect openness to the work of the Spirit.

I consider this project to be one of the most important ecclesial initiatives undertaken in the North American church in a number of years. As but a small contribution toward the goal of the Common Ground initiative I would like to explore in this article what I believe to be one source of polarization which exists among certain church leaders and intellectual elites, namely disagreement over the nature and scope of the church renewal called for by Vatican II.

I. Authentic Church Renewal and the Teaching of Vatican II

Pope John Paul II has repeatedly called for the authentic assimilation of the teaching of Vatican II as vital to the preparation for the coming Jubilee year. In his apostolic letter outlining preparations for the Jubilee year he writes:

The best preparation for the new millennium, therefore, can only be expressed in a renewed commitment to apply, as faithfully as possible, the teachings of Vatican II to the life of every individual and of the whole Church. It was with the Second Vatican Council that, in the broadest sense of the term, the immediate preparations for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 were really begun. If we look for an analogy in the liturgy, it could be said that the yearly Advent liturgy is the season nearest to the spirit of the Council. For Advent prepares us to meet the One who was, who is and who is to come (cf. Rev 4:8) [“As The Third Millennium Draws Near,” # 20].

The key word here is “faithfully,” because many of the differences between so called conservatives and liberals can be traced to different interpretations of what constitutes a “faithful” application of council teachings. The source of this difference, I contend, lies in differing methods of interpreting conciliar documents and differing assumptions about the role of councils in general. Consider two leading voices within the Catholic church today, Fr. Richard McBrien and Mother Angelica. The first is an outspoken moderate-to-liberal theologian, a syndicated columnist whose views often appear in the liberal Catholic newspaper, *The National Catholic Reporter*, and an outspoken critic of the exercise of leadership and authority in the church today. The second figure is the founder and leading spokesperson for the Eternal Word Television Network, an uncompromising champion of unswerving obedience to the Holy See, and an often vitriolic critic of the so called liberal agenda. Amazingly, both of these figures would consider themselves faithful to the teachings of Vatican II and both would criticize post-conciliar developments for betraying the authentic vision of the council. This, I suggest to you, is a vivid portrait of polarization in the church today! An important

difference lies in the way in which widely divergent voices such as these interpret the documents of Vatican II.

A. Vatican II as a Transitional Council

Let us recall a crucial feature of the Second Vatican Council, one explored by the German theologian, Hermann Pottmeyer [“A New Phase in the Reception of Vatican II: Twenty Years of Interpretation of the Council,” in *The Reception of Vatican II*, eds. Giuseppe Alberigo, Jean-Pierre Jossua and Joseph A. Komonchak, 1987]. Vatican II was a transitional council--that is, it was a council which sought to move out of the dominant theological mentality of neo-scholasticism, by both retrieving a more ancient vision of the church and bringing the church into a more positive dialogue with the principal concerns of the modern age. It is the transitional character which led to the well known divisions at Vatican II between a majority of bishops who favored the general thrust of the council, and a minority who were cautious, fearing that vital elements of church tradition might be abandoned as a result of this two-fold process. In this often tense atmosphere, the pragmatic demands for getting documents approved by the whole council required the employment of what Pottmeyer calls the method of juxtaposition. When achieving full consensus was unlikely, one way of obtaining approval of a document was to juxtapose, sometimes in the same paragraph, the ideas and conceptions reflective of the positions of the conflicting parties or theological schools, even if these two sets of ideas and conceptions could not be easily reconciled. This was the case, for example, with the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church where we find the assertion of the supreme authority of the papacy in the more juridical language of Vatican I set along side the

assertion of the supreme authority of the college of bishops without any developed consideration of how they relate to one another.

The advantage of this method of juxtaposition was that it ultimately enabled passage of sixteen conciliar documents. The disadvantage was that it would become possible for the various ideological camps of both the left and the right, to appeal to particular passages which appear to support their particular ecclesiastical agenda. It is frequently the case that both camps have allowed ideological agendas to create their own “canon within a canon”; each cites conciliar passages in justification of their agenda without any consideration of the whole corpus of documents. The only way out of this impasse is to adopt an explicit, interpretive methodology, a conciliar hermeneutic, that tries to go beyond the juxtaposition of texts in an effort to discern the emerging theological vision which is evident in the conciliar documents. This hermeneutic will require a careful consideration of the sources from which a text draws, the history of its development and a consideration of the questions it was intended and not intended to address. In conclusion, the authentic interpretation of conciliar teaching cannot lie in selective proof-texting but in the careful study of both the council documents themselves and the considerable supporting documentation surrounding the council (e.g., the council *Acta*, minutes of the various commissions, the journals and diaries of participants). Only in this way can we hope to discern the authentic teaching of the council.

B. Authentic Renewal as an “Increase in Fidelity to the Church’s Calling”

Virtually all who accept the authority of Vatican II grant that the Second Vatican Council effected an ecclesial renewal. Significant differences emerge, however, in the assessment of both the nature and scope of that renewal. For most church conservatives,

Vatican II proposed a vision of renewal which, though hardly cosmetic, was largely practical in nature. In assessing the relative continuity vs. discontinuity between the pre-conciliar church and that ecclesiology actually proposed by the council, most conservatives would stress continuity. They question whether the documents themselves disclose the dramatic paradigm shift that liberals often find in conciliar documents. Furthermore, they are inclined to view much of what passes for post-conciliar renewal as a blatant capitulation to the worst features of liberal modernity. This is not the place to consider the merits of these concerns, some of which certainly deserve more serious consideration. What I do wish to do is demonstrate how one can find in the teaching of the council a far-reaching mandate for renewal that depends not on the secular values of modernity, but on a reinvigoration of the church's properly theological identity.

Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism said that "every renewal of the church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling." (# 6). The source of renewal in the church does not lie in the cooption of one political theory or another. Authentic church renewal comes from a reinvigoration of the church's own *theological* identity. Indeed, I would contend that church renewal becomes necessary precisely when the church has lost sight of its theological identity and over-identified itself with some secular institution, as when some today uncritically apply liberal democratic principles to church governance or when the medieval papacy progressively took on the visage of the imperial court.

The renewal encouraged by Vatican II was inspired by a fresh reappraisal of the church's long neglected biblical, patristic and liturgical roots in light of new challenges posed to the church by the modern world. It was this fresh reading of tradition, not the

pressures of secular modernity, that led to the articulation of a new theological and ecclesiological vision. It is this ecclesiological vision that is to be the heart of church renewal. But what is the substance of this renewal? Is it simply an ecclesial version of rearranging the furniture? In the balance of this article I will consider some of the foundations for church renewal evident in the conciliar documents.

III. The Theological Foundations of Post-Conciliar Church Renewal

One could offer a long list of important theological developments found in the documents of Vatican II. However, I would like to consider three basic theological principles which I believe are reflected in the council's documents and which, if seriously engaged, would demand a profound revisioning of the church for the next millennium.

First Principle: The Word of God is Given to the Whole Church

The council's more personalist theology of revelation stood in contrast to a more propositional view which understood revelation primarily as a collection of doctrinal statements. In the theology of Vatican II, Jesus Christ, as both the mediator and sum of divine revelation, is God's personal address to, not only the whole church, but the whole human race. The one font of divine revelation, the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ, comes to us in both scripture and tradition. Tradition in turn progresses "through contemplation and study by believers, who 'ponder these things in their hearts'; through the intimate understanding of spiritual things which they experience; and through the preaching of those who, on succeeding to the office of bishop, receive the sure charism of truth" (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, #8).

I do not believe that we the church have sufficiently grappled with the radicality of this theology of revelation. Firmly rejected was the view that divine revelation is a body of “sacred information” about God which God communicates primarily to the hierarchy who then transmit that same body of “sacred information” to the rest of the church. In faith and baptism every believer submits to the revelatory and salvific power of the Christ event. That Christ event is faithfully proclaimed in scripture and continues to abide in the church’s living tradition. The power of this living Word of God is discovered by the Christian community in the complex relations and activities that constitute the life of the community. This view stands in startling contrast to the highly pyramidal ecclesiology of the late Middle Ages and Counter-Reformation engendered a “trickle down” view of revelation in which God’s Word is given to the church hierarchy and “trickles down” to the laity. Rather, Vatican II’s ecclesiology of communion engenders a theology of revelation grounded in the living Word of God received and sustained within the whole Christian community.

This theology does not in anyway negate the essential role of the bishops as authoritative teachers of the faith. It does however, place the teaching ministry of the bishops, including the bishop of Rome, in a larger ecclesial framework. This new framework is reflected in the very beginning of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, which begins with the line: “Hearing the Word of God reverently, and proclaiming it confidently, this holy synod....” This opening clause suggests the bishops’ dual task of listening to and proclaiming God’s Word. Yet in the Roman Catholic tradition much more attention has been given to the *teaching* acts of the bishops; this needs to be matched by equal attention to the *listening* process of the bishops. If the

bishops are the authoritative *teachers* of the apostolic faith, it is only because they are first *hearers*. Their teaching is not a *determinatio fidei*, an independent determination of the faith of the Church, but a *testificatio fidei*, a witness to that which they have received, to that which they have heard. In this regard the council writes:

This Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, # 10).

This passage must be understood in conjunction with article 8 which affirmed the role of the whole people of God in transmitting the faith. For if the authoritative teachers of the faith are to first listen to the Word before they can teach it; where do they turn to hear God's Word? This Word does not drop down from heaven. Does it not reverberate in the life and worship of the Christian community itself? We must dismiss any supernaturalist notion of divine assistance to the bishops that bypasses human processes or imagines that at episcopal ordination a bishop receives a supernaturally infused "microchip" containing the totality of divine revelation. In the council's teaching on scripture and tradition and the supernatural sense of faith given to all the baptized, it clearly affirmed that the Word of God emerges within the whole church through a complex set of ecclesial relationships in which all the baptized play important though distinctive roles. Since the sixteenth century it had become common to distinguish between the teaching church (*ecclesia docens*) which was the hierarchy, and the learning church (*ecclesia discens*) which was the laity. The vision proposed by the council

suggests that we must now begin to see the whole church as both a teaching and learning church.

Second Principle: The Church is a Spiritual Communion

The vision of the church developed at Vatican II also represented a decisive move away from an excessively institutional view of the church and toward an ecclesiology grounded in the concept of communion. Even when the term “communion” does not itself appear, a careful reading of the principal conciliar documents suggests that the concept was among the most influential at the council. The council retrieved this notion of communion from the biblical and patristic concept of *koinonia* or *communio*. It underlies many different biblical metaphors and images of the church (e.g., Body of Christ, vine and the branches). This ecclesial communion is two-fold: first, the church draws us into communion with God (the vertical dimension of ecclesial communion); second, in the church we are drawn into communion with one another. In the first article of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church the council wrote that “the church, in Christ, is a sacrament--a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and the unity of the entire human race.”

The full theological significance of understanding the church as a communion lies in the church’s relationship to the triune life of God. With Italian theologian Bruno Forte we can say that the church is an “icon of the trinity” [*The Church: Icon of the Trinity*, 1991]. The meaning of the church as a communion is drawn from our understanding of God as a communion of persons. In other words, it should be possible to derive from trinitarian theology a set of grammatical rules which would govern the structures and life

of the church. Let us consider three statements from trinitarian doctrine which each engender an ecclesial corollary.

First, trinitarian doctrine holds that the being of God is fundamentally personal. There is no abstract divine essence that can be discovered “behind” the trinitarian persons. Our relationship with God is always a “personal” relationship. Moreover, trinitarian doctrine reminds us that the divine persons are constituted by relations. We are taught that for God to be personal means perfect relationality. This relational view of the being of God permeates the scriptures and in particular the Johannine community’s dynamic understanding of God as love. This basic theological insight yields the following ecclesial corollary:

Corollary # 1. The church is constituted by the life of communion. Just as trinitarian persons are relational and cannot be conceived apart from their divine relations, so too the church is constituted relationally.

Since humankind is created in the image and likeness of God, human persons are also constituted as personal and relational beings. Humans are made for communion. We believe that this life of communion is proclaimed and celebrated in word and sacrament within the church. Through our membership in the church we discover our true identity as creatures made for communion. Consequently, within the church there can be no autonomous loci of power and authority. The exercise of power and authority in the church can only be understood relationally. This suggests, among other things, a fundamental re-thinking of our theology of holy orders. Deacons, priests and bishops are to be defined not by some discrete set of sacramental powers which they receive through

ordination but rather by the uniquely sacramental relationship which ordination establishes between the ordinand and the community. All Christian ministry is relational.

Second, the doctrine of the trinity tells us that the trinitarian persons are both differentiated and egalitarian. Within the triune life of God there is differentiation of persons (the Unoriginate Origin is not the Logos, the Logos is not the Spirit) but there is no subordinationism. This yields a second ecclesial corollary:

Corollary # 2. Within the church there is a differentiation of relations or ordines but there can be no descending hierarchy characterized by relations of superiority and inferiority.

Vatican II insisted that the church is a *communio hierarchica*. However, this need not be understood as demanding a pyramidal, top-down structure. An ecclesiology of communion grounded in the triune life of God admits the existence of a stable differentiation of ecclesial relations and ministries; it does reject any differentiation or ordering which subordinates one relation or ministry to another. The sacrament of baptism establishes the most fundamental ecclesial relation in which every believer is given a supernatural instinct for the faith and the responsibility to proclaim that faith in word and deed.

Finally, trinitarian relations are characterized by mutuality and reciprocity. Within the divine life of God there is a fundamental to and fro movement or inter-penetration (*perichoresis*) among the divine persons. This insight yields, in turn, a third ecclesial corollary:

Corollary # 3. Within the life of the church all relationships are mutual and reciprocal.

The dynamism of the life of the Spirit is multi-directional within the various ecclesial relations which constitute the church. This is true of the relationships between the magisterium and theologians, the magisterium and the whole people of God, theologians and the people of God, bishop and priests, bishop and local church, pastor and parishioners, etc. In each relationship there must be a real recognition that both conversation partners will serve, at various moments, as teachers and learners. We as a church must begin to see ourselves as a community defined by a quality of interaction modeled on the triune life of God. This suggests that all of our talk about “collaborative ministry” must be more than just trendy language about working together on certain joint ministerial projects. The full theological import of the language of “collaboration” comes from this third corollary. We are not individual ministers who collaborate on projects, rather we are called to be collaborative ministers whose quality of interaction with one another, in all that we do, is to be characterized by mutuality and reciprocity.

Third Principle: The Universal Church is Realized and Manifested in the Local Churches.

Vatican II took important initial steps away from the highly pyramidal, institutional and even monolithic view of the church which dominated Catholic theology in varying degrees from the Council of Trent to the mid-20th century. No longer would the universal church be seen as a large corporate structure sub-divided into ecclesial branch offices. Vatican II recovered an ancient theology of the local church which viewed the universal church not as an institutional super-structure but as the *communio ecclesiarum*, the communion of local churches. Each local church which gathers at the eucharistic table

under the pastoral leadership of a bishop, hears God's Word proclaimed and celebrates the sacraments is *wholly* the Body of Christ (but not the *whole* Body of Christ) in that place.

This renewed theology of the local church opens the door to an appreciation of the unique gifts which each church possesses. It allows us to see the wonderful possibilities for each church to be a unique cultural incarnation of the one Christian faith. The gifts of these local communities may include a distinctive culture and accompanying liturgical, spiritual and theological traditions. This means that contemporary concerns in the church for inculturation are motivated by properly theological concerns and should not be confused with some politically correct theory of multiculturalism.

Similarly, this principle explicitly affirms that bishops function, not as delegates of the pope or "branch managers" if you will, but as themselves "vicars of Christ" responsible for pastoring their local churches. For Catholics the Petrine ministry of the bishop of Rome is essential for the life of the church. This Petrine ministry is to be a ministry of service to the unity of faith and communion in the church. It suggests that it is the ordinary responsibility of the bishop of Rome, and by extension the Roman curia, to become involved in any matter that presents a significant threat to the unity of faith and communion. However, this third principle calls for a much greater application of the principle of subsidiarity in which pastoral issues are best addressed by the church leadership closest to the issue. This appears to be the ecclesiological principle currently at stake in the controversy regarding the revised lectionary. On ecclesiological grounds, it is hard to justify why decisions about vernacular biblical translations are not more appropriately made by the ordinary pastors of the churches whose native language is that into which the text is being translated.

To conclude, I believe that a careful study of the Second Vatican Council reveals the existence of three fundamental theological principles applied to the church: 1) that the Word of God is addressed to the whole Christian community, not just the hierarchy, 2) that the church is constituted relationally as a spiritual communion and 3) that the universal church is realized in the local churches. Any authentic church renewal will proceed from the church's reflections on these theological principles.

It is true that Vatican II was not primarily a doctrinal council in the sense that the council did not define any new dogmas. What the council did accomplish may be, in the end, far more important than solemnly defining a dogma. The council offered a profoundly *theological* vision of the church which demands a significant renewal of church structures and practices in keeping with this vision. With Pope John Paul II, let us agree on the fulfillment of this vision, with the renewal it entails, as our fundamental task in preparing for the coming third millennium.