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Nostalgia is not a path to the future

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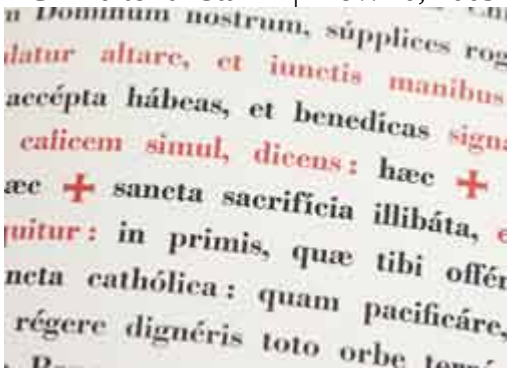

Detail of text from the 1962 Roman Missal, commonly known as the Tridentine Mass (CNS photo/Nancy Wiechec)

Editorial

It has been an open secret that powerful forces in the church?s leadership have strongly opposed the reforms set in motion by the Second Vatican Council and have worked quietly yet assiduously during the past 40 years to roll back what has been accomplished. The regression is usually couched in Orwellian churchspeak, which lavishes praise on the council even as its intentions are reversed. Or sometimes in this parallel universe the argument is made that nothing really happened during the gathering of the world?s bishops over a four-year period to redirect the church and its mission.

Then along came Cardinal Franc Rodé, head of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, who has vaulted to notoriety as the person overseeing the investigation of U.S. women religious. He is quoted in this issue, from a talk he gave in September 2008, as blaming the problems of Vatican II on a misguided ?hermeneutic? or interpretation, which he calls ?a hermeneutic of rupture and discontinuity.? That is a rather elaborate way of saying that one believes nothing really happened at the council. To Rodé?s credit, in more recent comments to John Allen (*NCR*, Oct. 30), he changes tone. In his latest pronouncement, it wasn?t the interpretation, but the council itself that was the problem. In his conversation with Allen, he credits the council with some muscular intent, and sees its documents holding the language of significant change. Otherwise why would he make the shocking charge that the council caused ?the greatest crisis in church history ? the first truly global crisis? in the church?

No doubt he spoke for other Roman curia members who would never utter such a brash assessment publicly.

What is it, though, that the cardinal finds so disastrous? What would he have us return to? Would he want to go back to the days when the church condemned separation of church and state?

Would he want us to return to a condemnation of religious liberty? Three popes since the council have upheld the principle of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, an assertion that would have been unthinkable before 1965.

Maybe his objection is to *Nostra Aetate*, the document on church relations with non-Christian religions. Perhaps he would want us to return to the days of open hostility toward Jews in our prayers and sermons.

Or does he feel that modernity and ecumenism have so infected the church that we should return to those days when Catholics were prohibited from attending the funerals of friends if held in a Protestant church, or when we were barred from attending a non-Catholic college without the permission of the local bishop?

Does he want a return to the 19th-century papal condemnation of freedom of conscience?

Or is he upset that most do not prefer, as he does, dressing up in the trappings of royalty, the yards of silk in the *cappa magna*, the canopies and throne chairs and all the rest -- being attended by his minions, younger priests in lacy surplices, birettas and old-fashioned vestments encrusted with gold thread and jewels -- all the while speaking in a dead language, facing a wall, his back to the people?

All of this was the preconciliar church. Which elements does he want restored?

Or possibly he regrets the fact that laypeople have wide access these days not only to the scriptures but also to the documents of Vatican II, and thus can say with authority that his version of church, dependent on a thin culture of nostalgia, holds no promise of the future.

Against that culture, the people of God can say convincingly that our worldwide church, in elaborate deliberation, has decided to go forward, not backward, and that the authors of that change wrote compellingly of the need for new and more inclusive ways of conducting ourselves as 21st-century Catholics.

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