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The new spin on Vatican II

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Analysis

Editor?s note: This is the second part of a series exploring the long-standing "liturgy wars" and how they shape today?s understanding of the Second Vatican Council.

Not too long ago, when bishops spoke about the Second Vatican Council, the language you?d hear would often include words like *people of God*, *dialogue* and *collegiality*.

That was then. Now, if a bishop speaks of that council, which involved the world?s bishops in meetings spanning the years 1962 through 1965, another word -- hermeneutics -- will likely dominate the discussion. It?s an unwieldy term that traditionally was used in college-level classrooms and referred to principles of interpretation, particularly in matters of scripture.

When it comes to Vatican II, however, the term has come to mean how one interprets that event and it is usually modified by phrases that have become a sound-bite way of separating Catholics into two general camps:

- Hermeneutic of discontinuity (sometimes referred to as the hermeneutic of rupture) is used to refer to those who think the council represented a distinct change from the past, and is used often to disparage those who speak of a pre-Vatican II and post-Vatican II church.
- Hermeneutic of continuity or renewal refers to those who would hold that very little actually changed at Vatican II, that it was a ?reaffirmation? of all that went before only cast in new language so as to be understandable to the modern era.

Dividing people into hermeneutic camps has become a favorite tactic of conservative commentators and some bishops, especially those who most want to downplay the idea that the council altered the teaching or attitude of the church in any significant way. Others, however, see the categories as artificial and overstated, attempts at marginalizing as extreme anyone convinced that Vatican II ushered in important changes.

Talking points

Whatever one?s point of view, ?hermeneutics? has taken on a life equivalent to campaign talking points. The categories provide a coherent, easy-to-understand critique of what has become a standard perception of the council. Hermeneutics is echoing around the Catholic landscape and is being used to package ideas ranging from the investigation of religious orders to alterations in the liturgy.

The term played large at a meeting in September of last year at Stonehill College in Easton, Mass., a gathering said to have been influential in the decision of Cardinal Franc Rodé to initiate an investigation of women religious in the United States. At that gathering, Bishop Robert C. Morlino of Madison, Wis., spoke of the ?discontinuity hermeneutic? and ?the language of rupture.?

He was responding to a talk by Rodé about religious formation and education.

?The language that many people have learned -- it is clear from today that most of you resisted learning it, and I resisted learning it -- but the language that many people have learned is the language of the discontinuity hermeneutic, the language of the rupture, between pre-Vatican II and post-Vatican II,? Morlino said. ?Many if not most of our people have learned the language of the discontinuity hermeneutic. And in order to learn the language that Pope John Paul the Great and Pope Benedict are trying to teach us they have to unlearn the language that they learned.?

In an October pastoral letter on the ?future of the church in the diocese of Sioux City, Iowa,? Bishop R. Walker Nickless picked from the text of Pope John XXIII?s speech opening the council, a few lines that might be seen as undergirding the hermeneutics-of-continuity point of view. ?In opening the council, Blessed John stated that the ?greatest concern of the ecumenical council? was twofold: ?that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be [both] guarded and taught more efficaciously,? ? wrote Nickless. ?Later in the speech he elaborated on this: ?The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.? ? For Nickless, that means that the teachings of the church ?must be loved and guarded, yet brought forth and taught in a way understandable to the modern world.?

A few paragraphs later, he cites a 2005 speech by Pope Benedict XVI to the Roman curia in which the pope states that a large part of the difficulty in implementing the council stems 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.?

The ?hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture,? said Benedict, ?has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media, and also one trend of modern theology.? The alternative is hermeneutic of reform, which he also describes as the hermeneutic ?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 remaining the same, the one subject of the journeying people of God.?

Shortly after that passage, Nickless declares: ?The so-called ?spirit? of the council has no authoritative interpretation. It is a ghost or demon that must be exorcised if we are to proceed with the Lord?s work.?

A third hermeneutic

The matter of language is not insignificant, as Jesuit historian Fr. John W. O?Malley draws out at some length in his essay for the 2007 book *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* O?Malley argues, first, that it would hardly be exceptional for a council to be ?discontinuous? or distinctive from past councils. Perhaps the only thing common to councils prior to Vatican II, he says, is that they were all assemblies of bishops ?that have made authoritative decisions binding on the whole church. Other than that they differ considerably among themselves? and were ?to a greater or lesser degree discontinuous with one another.?

What made Vatican II especially different from all councils that preceded it, writes O?Malley, is the language used, a language so distinctive that it requires ?a new hermeneutic ... that takes serious account of the discontinuity, thus putting the council?s continuity in perspective.? For lack of a sound-bite name, one might just call O?Malley?s version the third hermeneutic.

Further, he says, the ?characteristic style of discourse? of prior councils comprised ?two basic elements? -- the canon, or law, formulated to impose a punishment, and the vocabulary appropriate to that genre. It uses ?power words,? or ?words of threat and intimidation, words of surveillance and punishment, words of a superior speaking to inferiors or ? to an enemy.? The language is used to define and limit, to make clear who is included

and who excluded.

In contrast, Vatican II used ?empowerment words,? words of reciprocity and persuasion as different from commands and anathemas. ?There is scarcely a page in the council documents on which ?dialogue? or its equivalent does not occur. ?Dialogue? manifests a radical shift from the prophetic I-say-unto-you style that earlier prevailed and indicates something other than unilateral decision-making.? Such language, writes O?Malley, did not make it into the documents ?without a fierce battle.? Things, indeed, were different about Vatican II at a fundamental level. Whether that difference is expressed in a hermeneutic of discontinuity or of renewal is a battle that still rages, along with, in some circles, the original fight over the language itself.

O?Malley?s view, of course, is that of one person. But it is widely seen, if the reviews are to be believed, as an updated and valuable articulation of the segment of the church that believes that the council represented significant change from previous ways of doing church business.

O?Malley?s analysis was important enough in the eyes of those advocating the hermeneutic of continuity to draw considerable attention from conservatives, not least of which was the late Fr. Richard John Neuhaus in the October 2008 issue of his magazine, *First Things*. He disapprovingly termed O?Malley?s book ?a 372-page brief for the party of novelty and discontinuity.? He declared at review?s end that the 2008 book *Vatican II: Renewal Within Tradition*, edited by Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering and offering an opposing view from O?Malley?s, makes ?it evident that the hermeneutics of continuity is prevailing, if it has not already definitively prevailed.?

How the scorecard ultimately nets out is probably more complex than the scoring system for Olympic figure skating. Longtime Catholic church observer and former *New York Times* columnist Peter Steinfels, reviewing the O?Malley book in December 2008, notes that the world?s bishops 50 years ago could have simply ?rubberstamped a series of routine texts prepared under Vatican oversight and gone home.?

?How the bishops took charge of the agenda and radically reshaped the outcome is a story of bold confrontations, clashing personalities and behind-the-scenes maneuvers,? he writes. Acknowledging that some, claiming an elusive ?spirit of the council,? have used the event to stake claim to changes well beyond any imagined by the council?s participants, Steinfels nonetheless argues that ?any effort to shuffle the cards of continuity and discontinuity so as to minimize the profound reorientation wrought by the council borders on the ludicrous.?

If, indeed, a ?profound reorientation? occurred because of the council, what does that mean today? And does the talk of a need to relearn language an attempt to return to, for lack of a more nuanced phrase, a pre-Vatican II reality? Morlino?s comments would certainly suggest such a course as would the later words of Rodé, who said in an interview with *NCR* that Vatican II precipitated ?the greatest crisis in church history? (*NCR*, Oct. 30).

Still seeking resolution

If there is little love in the Vatican these days for the council, experts in liturgy and history still exist who understand how profoundly some things have changed. Benedictine Sr. Mary Collins, a liturgy expert and former prioress, recalled in an interview that it wasn?t long before the council that Pope Pius XII, in his encyclical on liturgy, declared ?quite matter-of-factly that the role of the priest is essential and the role of the laity is not essential in the Mass, that it is the priest who effects the sacrifice of the Eucharist.?

In contrast, she noted, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy and the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church that came out of Vatican II articulated a far different ecclesiology, one in which ?it is the right and privilege and responsibility of the baptized, who are fully involved in the liturgy of the Eucharist.? The point, she said, was not to downplay the role of clergy, but rather to explain the more integral role of laity in the Eucharist.

?Twenty years out,? she said, ?I hope we?re not still arguing about Vatican II. I think the way this gets played out and resolved will make a massive difference in the shape the church takes 50 years from now. This is not a matter of irrelevance to the future of the church, but I would not presume to predict how it sorts itself out.?

The liturgy is at the cutting edge of the debate over the direction of the council and while in the English-speaking world the ?continuity hermeneutic? seems to have won the day with new prayer versions that attempt to be one-to-one translations from the Latin, the arguments seem far from resolved.

Fr. Michael Ryan, pastor of St. James Cathedral in Seattle for more than two decades, in December began a campaign to slow down implementation of the new translations of the missal. ?For some time I?ve followed the bishops? debates, read many of the new texts, discussed them with brother priests, and visited about them with Catholics in the pews, and I?ve become aware of how difficult it?s going to be to ?sell? ordinary, faithful, good Catholics on the new, Latinized translations of the Missal,? Ryan said in an earlier interview (*NCR*, Dec. 25).

So far he?s garnered more than 17,000 supporters in an online campaign at whatifwejustsaidwait.org.

In January, Benedictine Fr. Anscar J. Chupungco, director of the Paul VI Institute of Liturgy in the Philippines and former president of the Pontifical Liturgical Institute at Sant?Anselmo in Rome, gave a stinging critique of the ?reform of the reform,? a phrase used weeks earlier by none other than the papal master of ceremonies, Msgr. Guido Marini.

In a talk at Australia?s University of Newcastle?s program of liturgical studies, Chupungco responded to Marini?s claim that the Vatican II liturgical reform has ?not always in its practical implementation found a timely and happy fulfillment.?

?What are the possible implications of a reform of the postconciliar reform?? Chupungco asked. ?What remedy does it offer for a reform that according to some Catholics has gone bad? What agenda does it put forward so that liturgical worship could be more reverent and prayerful??

The liturgy envisioned by the council, he stated, ?was marked by noble simplicity and clarity. It wanted a liturgy that the people could easily follow. In sharp contrast is the attempt to revive, at the expense of active participation, the medieval usage that was espoused by the Tridentine [or pre-Vatican II] rite and to retrieve eagerly the liturgical paraphernalia that had been deposited in museums as historical artifacts.?

Comparing the reforms of Vatican II to a springtime renewal, Chupungco lamented that after more than four decades ?the church is now experiencing the cold chill of winter brought about by contrasting ideas of what the liturgy is and how it should be celebrated.? Such tension, he said, ?could be a healthy sign that the interest in the liturgy has not abated.? But he cautioned that after the council, ?we are not free to propound views? apart from principles established by the council. ?There are surely instances of postconciliar implementation that are debatable, but we should be careful to distinguish them from the conciliar principles, especially the full, active participation of all God?s people in the liturgy.?

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