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Defending the Hermeneutics of Reform

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 2, 2010 NCR Today

My colleague and friend Tom Roberts has an important post on the NCR website about the contrasting ?hermeneutics? with which people view Vatican II. It goes without saying that there are some people, but I doubt many, who believe that Vatican II was a mistake and wish to roll back the clock. I do not rank Pope Benedict among those few.

Before he was Pope, indeed before he was a cardinal or a bishop, Father Josef Ratzinger helped found the journal Communio. Another co-founder was Henri DeLubac, who was one of the theologians at the Council arguing against the curialist positions, that is, arguing for change. But, he did not call for simple (or complex) modernization. DeLubac called for a return to the sources, to the Scriptures and writings of the Church Fathers. He wanted to move forward be retrieving what had been lost in the stale and arid neo-scholasticism that permeated official Catholic theology in the age of the Piuses. DeLubac, of course, was silenced by Pope Pius XII who condemned his views in the 1950 encyclical Humani Generis. (I have always wanted to own the pen with which Pius XII signed that encyclical!) You cannot fairly charge Benedict with wanting to return to 1950 but he might revel in the charge that he wishes to return to 450.

The conciliar documents were passed by overwhelming majorities of the world?s bishops but they were also compromise documents and tensions exist within the texts themselves. The polemics in the aula exposed the fact that the curialists had become a distinct minority, but those in the majority did not always see eye to eye either, except in their rejection of the curialist position. Nowhere are the tensions more evident than in the document that was the special concern of the U.S. bishops at Vatican II, the Decree on Religious Liberty. The first section appears to endorse the West?s constitutional arrangements that are built upon a negative conception of liberty, a freedom from. But, the second half of the text embraces a positive conception, a freedom for. The two approaches yield very different results and the final text did not resolve the tensions.

Roberts cites the masterful work of John O?Malley, S.J. who is undoubtedly correct that it is simple falsehood to suggest that Vatican II didn?t change anything. But, O?Malley?s work failed to appreciate the ways that Communio theology challenges the views of both left and right in most theological disputations. It is precisely for this reason that Benedict continues to invoke the insights of the Communio school in his writings: He believes that it permits the Church to transcend the once fascinating but now increasingly stale debates that have engulfed the Church for the past forty years. In this sense, the hermeneutics of reform, which by its very definition involves both continuity and discontinuity, is the only way forward. Unfortunately for Benedict, some nostalgists will use his insights to try and put the toothpaste back in the tube and roll back the clock. But, there is no going back.

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