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Remembering, and Mis-Remembering, Vatican II

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 19, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

When you get a roomful of Catholics together, the subject of Vatican II is going to come up, especially in this year which marks the 50tih anniversary of the convening of the Council. Yet, these conversations about what the Council did and did not achieve, what it meant, the whole hermeneutical question seems to me the have gotten bogged down in ideological presuppositions that distort the Council itself and, in a more fundamental way, what a Council means to the life of the Church. I wrote about some of this last month, and you can read that commentary by clicking here [1].

I raise these issues now because tomorrow marks the anniversary of what may have been the most important day at the Council. At the Council, Xavier Rynne penned his ?Letters from Rome? series for the New Yorker, and these set the template for understanding the Council as a struggle between conservative curialists and the liberal reformers in which the liberal reformers overcame the opposition to reform in the aula. The reformers, convinced of the need for collegiality among the bishops, were not above getting direct papal intervention when needed, as happened after the November 20, 1962 vote on the curial draft text on revelation, *De Fontibus*, left the Council Fathers in great consternation. A majority had registered a vote indicating their displeasure with the draft document, a product of the curia, but they had failed to garner the two-thirds majority needed to set the document aside. They appealed to Pope John XXIII to intervene and create a ?mixed commission? of curialists and reformers to amend the text, which he did. The next day, the Pope?s decision was announced to the Council Fathers. The first major showdown went to the reformers. Over the next four years, the reformers won virtually every showdown.

This is all history. There can be a debate about the hermeneutics, but not about the facts. The curialists presented a document that represented the prevailing conservative theology of the day, and a majority of the bishops rejected it. The ?mixed commission? went on to draft a new text that reflected a far more sophisticated understanding of the issues involved, and not only as regarded this one document, but virtually every text. By the conclusion of the Council, the curial conservatives had been utterly defeated and the reformers utterly vindicated. This is a fact. No one today espouses the views once held by the curial conservatives, although the legalistic mindset that characterized that view persists in important ways.

Here is where the ideological predispositions enter the scene and confuse the issues. Not all the reformers wanted the same thing from their reforms. Those who were united against Cardinal Ottaviani and the curalists were not united amongst themselves. And, the actors themselves changed their own positions over time. But, what is clear is that in the post-conciliar era, two dominant theological trends developed, each with their own journals. The Concilium school and the Communio school were both led by those who had been champions of reform at the Council. But the Concilium school and the Communio school differed in important ways about what had been achieved at the Council.

This phenomenon of once united groups diverging after a victory is not unique to the Second Vatican Council. It did not take long after the adoption of the U.S. Constitution for two parties to form, one around James Madison and one around Alexander Hamilton. Both men had been instrumental in drafting and defending the

Constitution but both men saw in the document different themes and emphases that led them to become bitter rivals. Similarly, after the recent election, a fight is on within both parties for control of the narrative. Some pro-choice women?s groups are taking credit for Obama?s victory, even though his share of the women?s vote declined from what he achieved in 2008. Latinos, with a better case based on the numbers, claim that they put Obama over the top. These two groups will not always see eye-to-eye in the weeks and months ahead. And, on the Republican side, the fact of defeat has likewise created two groups within the GOP, the one saying Romney was too conservative during the primaries, and the other complaining that he was never enough of a true-red conservative to begin with.

In terms of understanding the Council, however, it is simply false to try and explain what followed as the resurgence of the curial conservative party. Joseph Ratzinger was a reformer at the Council, to be sure. Despite the widespread belief that he lost his reforming sensibilities as a result of the 1968 turmoil on campuses throughout the world, it was evident in 1966, when Ratzinger delivered a series of lectures that became his book ?Introduction to Christianity,? that he understood the Council?s call to reform as a call to renewal, a return to the sources of the Christian faith in the Patristic age and in the Scriptures themselves. Nothing Ratzinger wrote, not as a theologian and not as a Pope, suggests that he has abandoned his understanding of the need for reform at the time of the Council, still less that he has suddenly adopted the theology of Ottaviani. Nothing. What is clear is that Raztinger, already in 1966, understood that some were trying to make of the conciliar reforms something that was extraneous to the Church?s self-understanding, an adoption of attitudes and ideas drawn from the ambient culture that were, in the final analysis, incompatible with orthodoxy. There is not a sentence ever penned by Joseph Raztinger, not before the Council, not at the Council, and not since the Council, that would suggest any kind of rejection of normativity, any winking at the idea that the starting point for Catholic theology is anything other than the self-revelation of Jesus Christ and the Christian tradition that has carried that self-revelation through the centuries down to us. At its heart, Ratzinger?s theology, and that of the other Communio theologians, has been concerned, and rightly concerned, that the problem with secularization is not just an external problem but an internal one, that the eyes of faith can be in danger of adopting secular lenses, severing the connection between the Church today and its founding.

Some may see no danger here, but he has, and I do. And, not only theological danger, but historical danger. The other day, a friend opined that any significant reform always proceeds from the ground-up, not from the hierarchy down. Of course, Exhibit A for the counter-argument is the Council itself. You can search far and wide for evidence that the pre-conciliar Church was filled with lay people chomping at the bit for reform, but you will not find very much. Certainly, the great liturgical renewal associated with Solesmes laid the groundwork for the liturgical renewal at Vatican II, but Solesmes was hardly a populist enterprise. At the Council, key theologians and sympathetic bishops led the fights for theological renewal, but no history of the 1950s Church finds any proof that the people in the pews were in a lather about collegiality, or ecumenism, or even the Mass in the vernacular. In one area, the Church?s commitment to social justice and specifically its ties with organized labor, do you see anything that could be characterized as ?popular? but the links with labor had been constructed long before the Council and sanctioned by successive pontiffs. Vatican II cannot be understood except as a top-down event.

Tomorrow, we can reflect on the anniversary of the date when good Pope John set aside the regulations of the Council to help the emerging majority enact their will against curial opposition. It was a critical moment in the triumph of the reformers at Vatican II. I can think of no better way to commemorate that day, or the Council itself, than by rejecting the idea that what has followed the Council has essentially been a retrenchment, led by Joseph Ratzinger especially. Like Madison and Hamilton, some may have desired something different from those reforms from what Ratzinger desired. They may wish for a pontiff who will be more in accord with their own desires and less with those of Ratzinger and the Communio school. But, it is ahistorical, and tendentious, to suggest that anything in Raztinger?s career is somehow at odds with the spirit or the letter of Vatican II. Like Hamilton and Madison, there may be divergence about the significance of what had been achieved through

common effort, but we must rid ourselves of the temptation to suggest any sense of betrayal. It is not only uncharitable, it is historically inaccurate.

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