

Benedict XVI and the Interpretation of Vatican II

As the fortieth anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council approached, rumors began to spread that Pope Benedict XVI would use the occasion to address the question of the interpretation of the Council. The rumor was particularly promoted by Sandro Magister, columnist of *L'Espresso* and author of a widely read weekly newsletter on the Internet. For some time Magister had used this newsletter to criticize the five-volume *History of Vatican II* that had been published under the general editorship of Giuseppe Alberigo. When the last volume of this *History* appeared, Magister's newsletter called it a «non-neutral history» (9 Nov. 2001). The role of Giuseppe Dossetti at the Council and the reform-proposals of the Istituto per le Scienze Religiose that he founded were the objects of three separate newsletters (1 Dec. 2003; 3 Jan 2005; 30 Aug. 2005).

In a web-article on 22 June 2005, under the title: «Vatican II: The True History Not Yet Told», Magister gave great prominence to the launching of a book presented as a «counterweight» to the Alberigo *History*. For several years, its author, Agostino Marchetto, had been publishing severely critical reviews of the successive volumes of that *History* and of several auxiliary volumes generated in the course of the project sponsored by the Bologna Institute. Marchetto had now assembled these review-essays into a large volume entitled *Il Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II: Contrappunto per la sua storia* and published by the Vatican Press.¹

Magister's account of the launch of the book gave a good deal of attention to an address by the head of the Italian Bishops' Confer-

¹ A. Marchetto, *Il Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II: Contrappunto per la sua storia*, Vatican City 2005.

ence, Cardinal Camillo Ruini. Magister interpreted Ruini's speech, along with Marchetto's book, as a long-needed effort to counter-balance the interpretation of the Council attributed to Alberigo and an alleged «Bologna school» and to end the latter's «hegemony» over the interpretation of Vatican II.

The main criticisms of the *History of Vatican II* were: that it pays too little attention to the history of the texts of the Council and focuses instead on the mechanics and politics of Vatican II; that it relies too much on private sources, such as diaries, and not enough on the official *Acta*; that it sets the conciliar visions of John XXIII and Paul VI in tension, or even in contrast, with one another; that it interprets the Council too much in terms of discontinuity and rupture; that it downplays the final texts of the Council in favor of a vague «spirit of the Council».

In a web-article on 5 December 2005, Magister indicated that he expected Pope Benedict soon to address the issue of the interpretation of the Council. In anticipation he reprinted an essay by Walter Brandmüller, president of the Pontifical Commission for Historical Studies. Brandmüller's essay, first published in the November 29th issue of the Italian bishops' conference's daily newspaper *Avvenire*, preferred theological platitudes to historical interpretation of the Council, which he distinguished from other ecumenical councils because it was pastoral rather than dogmatic in character, an option of which Brandmüller did not seem to approve. He thought that «fear of pronouncing doctrinal condemnations and dogmatic definitions led to wide contradictions among the texts produced by the Council»; and he allowed himself the judgment that «in the light of historical developments it is clear that Vatican II would have been wiser to follow the lead of Pius XII and find the courage to expressly condemn communism». He did not think that Vatican II should be singled out for special notice in the long history of ecumenical councils and he thought that «the fashionable distinction between “pre-Vatican II” and “post-Vatican II” is of dubious theological and historical basis».

Magister considered this essay «the perfect preface» to what the Pope would say in his homily on the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Clearly, he himself «eagerly awaited» the speech in which he expected the Pope to declare himself against «the Bologna school» and its view of Vatican II as «a new beginning» in Church history. The Pope's homily on December 8th, it turned out, at least with respect to Vatican II, was a simple *ferverino* offering Our Lady as the

key to understanding the Council. There were no references to mistaken interpretations of the Council.

1. *The Pope's Christmas Address to the Roman Curia*

The much-anticipated remarks of the new Pope finally appeared as a part of his address to the Roman Curia on December 22, 2005.² Interest in his views was all the greater because he had himself participated in the Council as the chief theological *peritus* for Joseph Cardinal Frings and as a member of the progressive wing of theologians. In addition, he had on several occasions already published on the Council and its aftermath, most famously and controversially in a book of interviews with Vittorio Messori.³

Pope Benedict began his speech to the Curia with a set of questions that recall those for which John Paul II convoked the extraordinary session of the Synod of Bishops in 1985: «What has been the result of the Council? Has it been well received? In the reception of the Council, what has been good and what has been inadequate or mistaken? What still remains to be done?». The Pope does not attempt to answer them in this address except insofar as this is implicit in the remark that «in vast areas of the Church the reception of the Council has been somewhat difficult». Both the difficulties and the vast areas they affected are left unspecified, but one suspects that he has in mind the western world, that is, Western Europe and the Americas.

The difficulties in the implementation of the Council, he says, derive from the fact that «two opposing hermeneutics confronted and contested one another. One caused confusion, the other, silently but more and more visibly, has borne and is bearing fruit». The former hermeneutics will immediately be called «the hermeneutics of discontinuity or rupture», the latter «the hermeneutics of reform».

² The text may be found in six languages at the Vatican website: <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia_en.html>.

³ See *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco 1985); for earlier essays, *Catholicism after the Council*, in *The Furrow* 18 (1967) 3-23; *Zehn Jahre nach Konzilsbeginn: Wo stehen wir?*, in *Dogma und Verkündigung*, München 1977, 433-41; *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, San Francisco 1987, 367-93.

One is immediately struck by the oddness of the names given to these rival interpretative orientations. In contrast to one that stresses discontinuity, one might have expected a «hermeneutics of continuity or of fidelity». Similarly, in contrast to a «hermeneutics of reform», one might have expected the other view to be called «a hermeneutics of revolution». Instead, we have «discontinuity» and «reform» set in tension, as if they necessarily contrast. That they need not contrast is clear from the simple observation that genuine reform itself requires discontinuity—after all, something must change where there is reform. And in fact the larger part of Pope Benedict’s discussion of the hermeneutics of reform is devoted precisely to points of discontinuity in the Council’s achievement.

It is also somewhat odd that the Pope speaks of only two competing interpretations of the Council. He must surely know that there are more than two of them.⁴ At the extreme right (one hopes) are the sedevacantists, the people who sponsor websites devoted to pointing out «the heresies of Vatican II». Further toward the center are the followers of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre who himself stopped just short of saying that the Council taught heresy and contented himself with calling it the greatest disaster in the history of the Church. There are people who think that «discontinuity» marks many of the actions and teachings of the Council but would not speak of this as «rupture» nor a matter of creating a new Church. There are people who think that the Council did not even innovate where the Pope, in this address, sees innovation: that is, with respect to the understanding of the Church-world relationship.

Perhaps the Pope thought it would clutter his argument to get into these differences; but it is also typical of the Pope’s theological style, discernible in many of his writings, to pose a theological question in terms of two-part dichotomies, as he does here with respect to the clashing hermeneutics.

2. *The hermeneutics of discontinuity*

Pope Benedict is so brief in considering the «hermeneutics of dis-

⁴ A threefold typology is offered by É. Fouilloux, *Histoire et événement: Vatican II*, in *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 13 (1992) 515-38, and by myself in *Interpreting the Second Vatican Council*, in *Landas* 1 (1987) 81-90, and in *Interpreting the Council: Catholic Attitudes toward Vatican II*, in *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*, ed. by M.J. Weaver, R.S. Appleby, Bloomington (IN) 1995, 17-36.

continuity and rupture» that one must conclude that it was not the main point of his talk. Two aspects of it are pointed out. First, it «risks ending with a break between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church». This danger is simply noted without comment, which is somewhat surprising given that Cardinal Ratzinger in other writings had taken pains to criticize the idea that there are «ruptures» in the life of the Church. Instead, in this talk to the Roman Curia, the Pope goes on immediately to mention a second feature of this mistaken hermeneutics, namely, the view that, because they were the result of compromise, the final documents of Vatican II cannot be said to yield the real «spirit of the Council», which is to be found instead in «the impulses toward the new that underlie the texts». A passion for the new would thus be true fidelity to «the spirit of Vatican II».

In criticism of this view, the Pope rightly points out how vague this alleged «spirit of the Council» is, and what a large variety of proposals might be, and have been, included under it. But he then offers a comparison that illustrates more clearly the sort of view he is opposing. He says that this view conceives of an ecumenical council as a sort of constitutional convention, or constituent assembly, at which it would be possible to do away with one constitution and to write a new one. No such mandate is ever given to bishops, even when gathered in council; their only role is to serve as stewards of the constitution Christ gave to his Church. The gift they minister is one that has to be kept alive so that it can bear fruit, the Gospel parables making it clear «how in a Council dynamism and fidelity must be the same thing».

There is something curious about this comment of the Pope, since I do not know of anyone who has compared the Second Vatican Council to a constituent assembly; and certainly this was never in the minds of the editor and authors of the *History of Vatican II*. It is, of course, not an uncommon procedure in Roman documents to take a view that is considered dangerous and to push it a little (or even a lot) further, and then to repudiate the exaggerated position. Perhaps Benedict XVI by this comparison wished to warn that «the hermeneutics of discontinuity», taken to extremes, is a hermeneutics that sees the Council as revolutionary, at least in its «spirit».

3. *The hermeneutics of reform*

To ground the interpretative key he favors, Benedict XVI turns to

two papal speeches at the Council, the one with which Pope John XIII opened the Council on October 11, 1962, the other the one with which Pope Paul VI closed it on December 8, 1965. (It was perhaps the intention of the Pope to show a fundamental kinship between the two popes of Vatican II, against the idea that Paul VI had somehow betrayed John XXIII's vision.) From John XXIII, Benedict cites the famous passage in which the earlier pope had insisted that the Council could not be concerned only with preserving the faith, as if it were an antiquity, but had also to explore how that faith was to be «studied and presented in a way that corresponds to the needs of our time». This requires the famous distinction between «the substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith» and «the way in which it is presented». In his brief reflection on this passage, Pope Benedict stresses what new things this required: new thinking about Christian truth, a new and vital relationship with it, a new formulation of it. A fruitful interpretation of the Council thus combines fidelity and dynamism.

It is striking that only these two brief paragraphs are devoted to the Council's effort at a restatement of central Christian doctrine in a way that would make it more intelligible and attractive to contemporaries. This is somewhat surprising in a former professor of theology, particularly since he was himself the author of several important and illuminating commentaries on conciliar texts and themes. In an earlier essay he had even maintained that one might distinguish interpretations of the Council on the basis of which texts were considered primary: the doctrinal texts (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*; *Lumen gentium*; *Dei verbum*) or the texts on the Church's relationship with the world (*Dignitatis humanae*; *Nostra aetate*; *Gaudium et spes*).⁵ It would seem that Benedict did not wish to concentrate on the elements of discontinuity that might be met in the doctrinal texts of the Council; he preferred to illustrate such elements instead by the Council's effort to engage the modern world in a new fashion, the conciliar task to which the Pope devoted by far the larger part of his talk.

Pope Benedict does not cite a specific text in Paul VI's concluding speech, but the page-reference given in his text is to a section in which that Pope had spoken of the alienation of Church and society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁶ This estrangement Benedict uses

⁵ See Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology...*, 378-79.

⁶ Paul VI spoke of the Church's having been for the last centuries «absent and distant

to indicate the urgency of the question of the relation between the Church and the contemporary world or, as he seems to prefer to refer to it, the modern era. Here is where discontinuity seems most apparent.

The Pope offers a rapid historical survey of the difficulties the Church had experienced over the previous four centuries, beginning with the trial of Galileo (described with some understatement as a «very problematic beginning»), moving on to Kant's reductive religion and to the «radical phase» of the French Revolution, which left no room for the Church and faith, and ending with the «radical liberalism» of the nineteenth century and with natural sciences that claimed they had no need of the «God-hypothesis». Under Pope Pius IX the Church had responded with such «harsh and radical condemnations of such a spirit of the modern age» that it appeared «that there were no longer any grounds for a positive and fruitful understanding», given also the equally drastic refusals of those who considered themselves» representatives of the modern era». This impasse, and the implied criticism of Pius IX, provides the background against which Benedict sets out the novelty of Vatican II.

It was prepared, he says, by certain developments. In a statement that would have pleased John Courtney Murray, the Pope points to the recognition that the American political experiment offers «a model of the modern state different from that theorized by the radical tendencies that had emerged in the second phase of the French Revolution». Meanwhile, the natural sciences were learning more modesty about their range and limits. Developments were also taking place in the Church. Between the two world wars and especially after the second, «Catholic statesmen had shown that a modern lay state can exist that, nonetheless, is not neutral with respect to values but lives by reaching back to the great ethical sources opened by Christianity». (Perhaps a reference to Konrad Adenauer?) Finally, Catholic social teaching was developing and offering a «third way» between radical liberalism and Marxist theory of the state.

As a result of all this, as the Council opened, three circles of questions, defining a single general problem, awaited responses, required new ways of defining the Church's attitude to them: (1) the relation between faith and the modern sciences, including also modern his-

tory, here presented by the Pope as if it were as reductive as the natural sciences had been; (2) the relation between the Church and the modern State, the latter described as one «that was making room for citizens of various religions and ideologies, acting impartially towards these religions and simply assuming responsibility for the orderly and tolerant co-existence among citizens and for their freedom to exercise their own religion» (this limited role also a description that Murray would have welcomed); (3) the relation between Christian faith and the world religions, especially Judaism. The adjective «new» occurs four times in this section, and the Pope admits that in these areas a certain degree of discontinuity did in fact emerge

In the Pope's remarks about the developments that led to this situation, one can hear echoes of the position he set out thirty years earlier when he said that *Gaudium et spes*, *Dignitatis humanae*, and *Nostra aetate*, represent «a revision of the *Syllabus* of Pius IX, a kind of counter-syllabus». Then he had spoken of twentieth-century developments, beginning with Pius XI, as a result of which

«[...] the one-sidedness of the position adopted by the Church under Pius IX and Pius X in response to the situation created by the new phase of history inaugurated by the French Revolution was to a large extent corrected *via facti*, especially in Central Europe, but there was still no basic new statement of the relationship that should exist between the Church and the world that had come into existence after 1789. In fact, an attitude that was largely pre-revolutionary continued to exist in countries with strong Catholic majorities. Hardly anyone today will deny that the Spanish and Italian Concordats strove to preserve too much of a view of the world that no longer corresponded to the facts. Hardly anyone today will deny that in the field of education and with respect to the historical-critical method in modern science, anachronisms existed that corresponded closely to this adherence to an obsolete Church-state relationship».

Against this background, *Gaudium et spes* can be interpreted as «an attempt at an official reconciliation with the new era inaugurated in 1789».⁷

Properly to understand and evaluate the discontinuity that this effort entailed, the Pope told the Roman Curia, requires one to make certain distinctions. The first distinguishes «between concrete histor-

⁷ Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic theology...*, 381-82.

ical situations and their demands», on the one hand, and «principles», on the other. This was, of course, the distinction in the matter of Church and State that was urged by people like Jacques Maritain and Murray and was rejected by their Roman and American critics for whom the Catholic confessional state was an ideal theologically, even dogmatically, required. For Pope Benedict, however, it is a valid and important distinction. Affirming continuity on the level of principles and discontinuity on the level of concrete applications – «this process of novelty in continuity» – reveals «the nature of true reform» and grounds the hermeneutics of reform. An affirmation of discontinuity in relation to Vatican II, then, is common to the two hermeneutics that the Pope has counterposed. The clash between the Pope's rival hermeneutics does not revolve around the issue of continuity vs. discontinuity.

The Pope goes on to explain and illustrate his distinction. Church decisions with regard to certain forms of liberalism or to liberal interpretations of the Bible had themselves to be contingent because they referred to concrete and changeable realities. He is, I believe, here referring to condemnations of religious freedom in the last two centuries and to decrees of the Pontifical Biblical Commission at the beginning of the last century. In the remarks with which he presented his Congregation's «Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian» (*Donum veritatis*), Ratzinger had already pointed to such texts as examples of magisterial decisions that «cannot be the last word on a subject as such»; «provisional dispositions», they are valid at their core, but may need «further rectification» with respect to «individual details influenced by the circumstances at the time». He then maintained that «as a warning-cry against hasty and superficial adaptations, they remain fully justified; [...] but the details of the determinations of their contents were later superseded once they had carried out their pastoral duty at a particular moment».⁸

In his remarks to the Roman Curia, Benedict XVI makes a perhaps more valid distinction when he says that only the principles express the lasting element; «the concrete forms» instead are dependent on the historical situation and are therefore changeable. «Thus the basic decisions can remain valid while the forms of their application to

⁸ J. Ratzinger, *Theology is not Private Idea of Theologian*, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English Edition), July 2, 5.

new contexts can change». The Pope then offers an illustration: «if religious freedom is associated with agnosticism and relativism, it is only natural that it be rejected by those who believe us capable of knowing the truth about God. Quite different is a view of religious freedom that links it to the need of social co-existence and derives it from the fact that «the truth can never be imposed from without but must be appropriated by a person only through a process of being convinced». Religious freedom in the first sense, therefore, the Church can only condemn; religious freedom in the second sense the Church can embrace.

That this is a good illustration of the distinction between principles and concrete applications is not entirely clear. The difference here is not a matter of circumstances, but of two different notions of religious freedom. The same principles could quite logically lead to a rejection of the first and an acceptance of the second.

That this distinction also explains the whole history of the magisterium's teaching with regard to religious freedom from Gregory XVI (who called it «madness») to John Paul II (who regarded it as the most basic human right) is also debatable. For the 150 years before Vatican II there were Catholics who advocated religious freedom in the modern state, but did not do so on agnostic or relativistic grounds, which did not prevent many of them from becoming the object of ecclesiastical censure and suspicion. It was the Roman failure to consider that there was some possible middle-ground between indifference and establishment that causes sadness when one reviews this whole history. What were in fact variable applications of principle, as, for example, the ideal of the confessional state, were taken as necessary logical consequences of unchangeable doctrine. Where principle left off and contingent application began was the whole point at issue.

With *Dignitatis humanae*, the Pope goes on, the Council recognized and made its own «an essential principle of the modern State»; but at the same time, he says, the Council also returned in a new way to the deeper patrimony of the Church»; with this statement the Church could find itself in full harmony with the teaching of Jesus and the examples of the martyrs. The latter are said to have clearly rejected the state-religion and died for freedom of conscience and for the freedom to profess their own faith—«a profession that can be imposed by no state, but instead can only be appropriated by the grace of God, in freedom of conscience». A missionary Church today, he

says, has to commit itself to freedom of faith. The Pope here has leapt back over the centuries of Christendom to the example of the Church of the martyrs, who illustrate the «deeper patrimony of the Church». This is, of course, an implicit criticism of the intervening centuries.

As Pope Benedict neared the end of his remarks, he returned to the question of continuity and discontinuity:

«The Second Vatican Council, with its new definition of the relation between the faith of the Church and certain essential elements of modern thought, has revised and even corrected some historical decisions, but in spite of this apparent discontinuity it has maintained and deepened its inner nature and its true identity. The Church is, as much before as after the Council, the same Church, one, holy, catholic and apostolic on a journey across time».

After all he has said so far, it is surprising to find the Pope referring to the discontinuity as simply «apparent». He had already said that elements of discontinuity had appeared in the conciliar texts on the Church's relation to the modern age and that on the question of religious freedom, the Council had permitted the Church to rejoin the example of Christ and the testimony of the martyrs. It would perhaps be more consistent to say that this real discontinuity did not threaten the true nature and identity of the Church but permitted the Church to recover elements that had been compromised.

It might also be worth exploring what could be meant by «Church» in the paragraph just cited: what is it, or better, *who* is it that remains the same in the midst of such new relationships? After all, it is not just the world that has changed over the last few centuries, and the whole point that the Pope has been making is that the Church has had to come up with new definitions of the relation between its faith and the modern world. If it now understands itself differently in relation to that world, and acts in accordance with the new understanding and the new relationships, then it is in that respect and to that degree not «the same Church». A Church that was ready to condemn Jacques Maritain for his idea of a «new Christendom» and a Church that proclaims a right to religious freedom based upon human dignity is not in all respects the same Church.⁹

⁹ Ratzinger himself had made this point some years ago: «Christianity has never existed in a purely world-less state. Because it exists in men, whose behavior is “the world,” it never appears concretely except in a relationship to the world. This inter-

In the final paragraphs the Pope summarizes what the Council did as «a basic “Yes” to the modern era», and as «the step taken by the Council toward the modern era». He is at pains to point out that this was not and could not be an indiscriminate Yes and that there are important respects in which the Church must remain «a sign of contradiction». Repeating something he has said often in other places, he says that the Council did away with «mistaken or superfluous contradictions in order to present to this world of ours the demands of the Gospel in all their greatness and purity».

This step, which is the latest way in which the perennial problem of the relation between faith and reason has been dealt with, may be compared to events in earlier ages. Biblically, there was St. Peter’s exhortation to Christians to be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in them,¹⁰ something that was undertaken in the great patristic encounter with Greek culture. The second great example is that of the thirteenth century with the encounter between Christian thought and Aristotelianism, mediated by Jewish and Arab philosophers. The danger then was that because its tradition was so imbued with Platonism there would now be considered to exist an «irreconcilable contradiction» between faith and reason. It took the genius of Aquinas to promote «a positive relationship with the form of reason dominant at the time». Sadly, the Pope cannot refer in the centuries after Aquinas to any positive engagement with forms of contemporary reason of the quality or success of the patristic and the Thomist endeavors. That is a long time—700 years! After once more evoking the negative case of Galileo and after a vague reference to the many phases of «the difficult dispute between modern reason and Christian faith», he says that «with Vatican II the hour arrived in which a broad rethinking was required». In the conciliar documents may be found the broad outline, the general direction, in which this dialogue between faith and reason must be undertaken.

weaving with the world may mean that in an apparent clash between faith and world, it is not Christianity itself that is being defended against the world, but only a particular form of its relationship to the world that is being defended against another form. For example, what may seem to be a conflict between faith and world may really be a conflict between the thirteenth century and the twentieth, because the thirteenth century’s polarizing of Christian existence is being identified with the faith itself», *Der Christ und die Welt von heute*, in *Dogma und Verkündigung...*, 187.

¹⁰ The Pope makes the common substitution of «faith» for «hope» in the text of 1 Pet 3:15.

4. *Continuity and Discontinuity at Vatican II*

In the end one is left with the impression that the sharp disjunction between rival hermeneutical orientations with which the Pope began his remarks on the Council has become much less sharp in the course of his argument. The «reform» which Benedict sees as the heart of the Council's achievement is itself a matter of «novelty in continuity», of «fidelity and dynamism», indeed it involves important elements of «discontinuity». It is, of course, possible to contrast two approaches by saying of one: «You stress only continuity!» and of the other: «You stress only discontinuity!» But these positions are abstractions, and it would be difficult to find anyone who maintains either position. Perhaps the Pope's counterposed hermeneutics represent what sociologists call «ideal-types», possibly useful tools for setting out the important questions, but not to be taken as literal descriptions of positions actually held by anyone. A hermeneutics of discontinuity need not see rupture everywhere; and a hermeneutics of reform, it turns out, acknowledges some important discontinuities.

It might be helpful to recognize that the question of continuity can be put from a doctrinal standpoint, from a theological, standpoint, and from a sociological or historical standpoint. From a doctrinal standpoint, there is clear continuity: Vatican II did not discard any dogma of the Church and it did not promulgate any new dogma. On the other hand, the Council did recover important doctrines that had been relatively neglected in the previous centuries: e.g., the collegiality of bishops; the priesthood of all the baptized; the theology of the local Church; the importance of Scripture; etc. Reasserting such things meant placing other doctrines in broader and richer contexts than before. Finally, the Council departed from the normal language of ecumenical councils such as Trent and Vatican I and followed Pope John's injunction that it offer a positive vision of the faith and to do so in a more accessible rhetoric, particularly, as he also urged, by abstaining from the sort of anathemas that had been pronounced by previous ecumenical councils.

Theologically, the Council was the fruit of movements of theological renewal in the twentieth century: in biblical, patristic and medieval studies; in liturgical theology; in ecumenical conversation; in new, more positive encounters with modern philosophy; in rethinking the Church-world relation; in rethinking the role of lay people in the Church. Most, if not all, of these movements had fallen under some

degree of official suspicion or disapproval in the decades prior to the Council, an attitude reflected in the official texts prepared for Vatican II. There was real drama in the first session of the Council (1962) when those texts were severely criticized for falling short of the theological and pastoral renewal already underway. The leadership of the Council was transferred to prelates who were open to such renewal, and theologians who had been under a cloud for years were brought in as official experts. In all this there was considerable discontinuity.

From the standpoints of sociology and of history, one looks at the Council against a broader backdrop and one cannot limit oneself to the intentions of the popes and bishops or to the final texts. One is now studying the impact of the Council as experienced, as observed, and as implemented. It is hard, from these standpoints, not to stress the discontinuity, the experience of an *event*, of a break with routine. This is the common language used by participants and by observers at the time--the young Joseph Ratzinger's reflections after each session, published in English as *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, are a good example.¹¹ It is from this perspective that James Hitchcock calls Vatican II «the most important event within the Church in the past four hundred years», and the French historian/sociologist, Emile Poulat, points out that the Catholic Church changed more in the ten years after Vatican II than it did in the previous hundred years.¹² Similar positions are held by people along the whole length of the ideological spectrum. Whether they regard what happened as good or as bad, they all agree that «Something happened».

It would be helpful if such distinctions of standpoint were kept in mind. They could help to identify where precisely differences in the interpretation of Vatican II really lie and to assess whether they are really in conflict with one another. Pope Benedict's own performance in this speech is itself an example of a serious effort at discernment and greatly elevated the level of discussion that had preceded it.

As for the *petite histoire* with which I began, it is not possible to read Pope Benedict's remarks on the hermeneutics of the Council as a repudiation of the *History of Vatican II*. Neither the editors nor the authors of individual chapters in the five volumes entertain the exag-

¹¹ J. Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, New York 1966.

¹² J. Hitchcock, *Catholicism and Modernity: Confrontation or Capitulation?*, New York 1979, 75; E. Poulat, *Une Église ébranlée: Changement, conflit et continuité de Pie XII à Jean Paul II*, Paris 1980, 41.

gerated hermeneutics of discontinuity which the Pope criticizes. None of them denies the Church's continuity in the faith. Where they do point to rupture or discontinuity, it is precisely where the Pope has placed it: in the Council's effort at a more successful engagement with the modern world than had been achieved by the anti-modern attitudes and strategies adopted by the papacy since the French Revolution. This was *la svolta epocale* which Giuseppe Alberigo proposed as the historic significance of the Second Vatican Council, and so far from being repudiated, it seems to me that it was affirmed and confirmed by Pope Benedict XVI.

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Summary: *The History of Vatican II*, edited by G. Alberigo, had been the target of some severe criticisms and some expected Pope Benedict XVI to side with the critics. In his speech to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2005, however, while distinguishing between a «hermeneutics of discontinuity» and a «hermeneutics of reform», the Pope himself presented the work of the Council, especially with regard to the Church's relation to the world, in terms both of «novelty» or «dynamism» and of «continuity» or «fidelity», a position that cannot be taken as a repudiation of Alberigo's History