

CONTROVERSY IN AD2000— WHAT AUTHORITY HAS VATICAN II?

In March 2010, the Australian journal *AD2000* published an article by Melbourne Catholic writer John Young entitled *What the Second Vatican Council really said*.¹ In the July following, the editor published a response by English Catholic barrister, James Bogle—*Vatican II, infallibility and the Church today*—and a riposte by Young entitled *Infallibility and Vatican II*.² The reader can study these offerings at the links given in the footnotes below. In the August edition, Melbourne writer, Frank Mobbs, entered the fray with a letter; and in the September edition battle became general, as it were, with further contributions from Bogle and Young, and a contribution from theologian, Fr Brian Harrison. Although these latter are not yet available on-line, it is likely the publishers of *AD2000* will provide that access, so that anyone interested in the debate can follow the various reasonings on offer.

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John Young

John Young sets out the traditional content of many of the Council documents as the platform for his thesis that, had its directives only been followed, there would have occurred that springtime in the Church for which Pope John Paul II had hoped. But he fails to deal with the reasons why its directives were not followed. Accurate statements of the Church's teaching were balanced by others ambivalently expressed, and others again which were novel, if not in conflict with that teaching. And *conduct* was to prove a more eloquent teacher than *words* as the media reported behavioural lapses by various of the Council Fathers. If bishops could ignore the demands of Church discipline, why should the faithful not do the same?

James Bogle

While supporting John's right to criticise those who challenge the legitimacy of the Council, James Bogle differs in his approach with this telling observation.

"It is an erroneous kind of loyalty that pretends that there is no crisis when there is one, or which overlooks what is prologue to such a crisis."

Notwithstanding his agreement that the Council was ecumenical, James maintains that some of its documents are clearly fallible. It would be wrong, he says,—

"to invest them with an infallibility that the popes and the fathers of the Council clearly did not intend or propose."

He goes on—

"It is common ground... that the [Second Vatican] Council issued no solemn definitions... That is not to say that its teachings are somehow optional. Far from it. Teachings of popes and councils, even when not infallible should be given "religious submission of mind and will" (*Lumen Gentium* 25 and *Can.* 752) unless, of course, they clearly conflict with hitherto established or infallible Catholic teaching."

¹ Cf. http://www.ad2000.com.au/articles/2010/mar2010p10_3242.html

² Cf. http://www.ad2000.com.au/articles/2010/jul2010p12_3325.html

But how, if Vatican II was an ecumenical council, *could* they conflict with such teaching? More than this; where is the authority for this qualification? There is nothing in *Lumen Gentium* 25 (which the Canon Law provision reiterates) to ground it; nor anything elsewhere in the Council documents.

Dr Frank Mobbs

Dr Mobbs criticises John Young's assertion that the teaching of the Council Fathers in *Dignitatis Humanae* was infallible because the Church had previously issued disciplinary orders which implied that the Church denied a right to religious freedom. Yet he finds consolation in what he thinks to be true, "that the [Church has] never *defined as a doctrine*" that those who deny the Catholic Faith have no rights to hold or propagate their beliefs or to act upon them. (emphasis in the text)

John rightly corrects him for failing to distinguish the disciplinary from teaching provisions of an ecumenical council, but he omits to comment on the implication contained in this latter assertion.

Fr Brian Harrison

Fr Harrison says the "mainstream position" of theologians would place the Council's teaching in *Dignitatis Humanae* in the third of the three categories of Catholic doctrines in the Church's *Professio Fidei* (elaborated in the Doctrinal Commentary issued by the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* on 29th June 1998), a category of teaching requiring docility and assent (*Lumen Gentium* 25), but not that it be held definitively.

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Where does all this leave the bemused faithful? Was Vatican II an ecumenical council? If so, why was the teaching in *Dignitatis Humanae* not infallible? If Fr Harrison is right, why is that teaching, as it were only qualifiedly binding? If James Bogle is right, are we entitled, before giving them our allegiance, to weigh the authority of each of the Council's teachings to see whether they "clearly conflict with hitherto established Catholic teaching"?

Each of the contributors assumes that the Council was an ecumenical council. This is understandable. Every pope since John XXIII has asserted that Vatican II was an ecumenical council. And Pope Paul VI confirmed each of the Council's determinations. And, surely, a pope cannot err.

But, if a pope cannot err, why in his very first public utterance after elevation to the Papacy, did Pope Benedict XVI say in an impromptu speech to the priests of Aosta:

"The Pope is not an oracle; he is infallible in very rare situations, as we know. Therefore, I share with you these questions, these problems. I also suffer..." [29 July 2005]

Indeed, it is precisely because a pope *can* err that the Vatican Council in 1870 (*Pastor Aeternus*) laid down with rigour the circumstances that must obtain to ensure that when he speaks he does not err. Melchior Cano, theologian of the Council of Trent, has best expressed the principle at stake:

“Peter has no need of our lies or flattery. Those who blindly and indiscriminately defend every decision of the supreme Pontiff are the very ones who do most to undermine the authority of the Holy See—they destroy instead of strengthening its foundations.”³

Did the four conditions laid down in *Pastor Aeternus* obtain when John XXIII pronounced the gathering of the world’s bishops an ecumenical council? They did not. It follows that *he might have been in error* in so labelling it. How can we know whether he was, or was not, in error? Only by weighing the Council against the reality to which each of the previous twenty Ecumenical Councils conformed. When this is done one sees real problems with Pope John’s pronouncement, and with Pope Paul VI’s subsequent endorsement, of Vatican II as an ecumenical council.

The following argument is subject to the Church’s ruling.

The *gratia gratis datae* of infallibility is given to the college of bishops only for adequate reason. An ecumenical (or general) council is called by a pope to address some issue whose determination is essential to the welfare of the Church and the faithful. The welfare of Church and faithful is its end; its finality. Now the form (*essence*) of anything follows its finality.

In his *Opening Speech* to the Council Fathers, John XXIII acknowledged that there was no issue of doctrine or discipline to be determined, but that he had convoked the Council to make the Church relevant to the world, a reason conveniently summarised in a word he had coined in an earlier speech—*aggiornamento*. The Council was “to bring the Church up to date”. But the Church had no such need: the Church is outside time. Since, therefore, there was nothing essential to the welfare of the Church and the faithful to justify its convoking, Vatican II was *not* an ecumenical council.

The chief objection to this thesis is that each of the Council’s documents was ratified by Pope Paul VI. James Bogle is right when he says that no teaching of an ecumenical council assumes any authority unless it is ratified by a pope. But in order that its teachings be apt *matter* for the *form* of a pope’s ratification, the council must first *be* an ecumenical council. If Vatican II was not such a council—if Pope Paul only *thought* it was—it is simply irrelevant that he should have ratified the Council’s teachings and determinations. He acted in error, and nothing done in error can bind the Church.

That John XXIII called Vatican II “ecumenical”, or that his successors and the bishops and priests of the world have done the same ever since, is with the greatest respect to each one of them, not to the point. Truth is not determined by assertion; it is determined by reality: for truth (logical truth) is the identity between what is asserted and what is.

³ Quoted in George Weigel, *Witness To Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*, London, 2005, p. 15.

With Vatican II, it is suggested, Pope John XXIII reversed the protocol for the summoning of an ecumenical council: instead of an issue giving legitimacy to a council, a council resolved to give legitimacy to an issue. What was the issue? That the secular should be permitted access to the realm of the sacred. The character of secularisation of the sacred has afflicted the Church ever since.

This proof *a priori* is confirmed *a posteriori* with the issue of 'religious freedom'. On December 8th, 1864, in the encyclical *Quanta cura*, Pope Pius IX condemned the following proposition:

"Every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, led by the light of reason, he thinks to be the true religion." [n. 15]

The terms in which he did so do not admit of cavil or contradiction. They conformed precisely to the demands laid down six years later by the *Vatican Council* in *Pastor Aeternus*. In other words, when Pius IX pronounced this condemnation, the Church spoke infallibly. Twenty four years later, in his encyclical *Libertas praestantissimum* (20.6.1888), Leo XIII set out *in extenso* the reasons for the condemnation.

Since the Church does not contradict herself, *it is therefore impossible* that the teaching of the Council's bishops in *Dignitatis Humanae* was uttered by the Church. Nor was it. It was uttered only by the Church's bishops.

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Consistent with this argument, each of the contributors to the debate in *AD2000* is partly right and partly wrong.

John Young is right in his endeavours to defend the teachings of Vatican II as infallible—for if that Council was in truth ecumenical, the bishops could not have erred. But his backing of *Dignitatis Humanae* as an instance of infallible teaching proves his position to be wrong.

James Bogle is right in saying that certain of the teachings of Vatican II were fallible, but wrong in his insistence that the Council could still be an ecumenical council. When he asserts that one may qualify the clear words of *Lumen Gentium* 25 with the suffix *unless, of course, they clearly conflict with hitherto established or infallible Catholic teaching*, he has breached his own protocol; he has *himself* treated one of the more significant teachings of Vatican II as "somehow optional".

The slip is a significant one. For it recognises that the faithful are presented with real problems of docility when faced with teachings by a pope, or an allegedly ecumenical council, which are demonstrably defective. *And there are such teachings*. If James is correct in qualifying *Lumen Gentium's* statement of principle in this way, how on earth could the Council be said to have been ecumenical?

Frank Mobbs is right when he denies that the teaching in *Dignitatis Humanae* is infallible, but wrong when he implies that the Church has never taught infallibly that those who deny the Catholic Faith have no rights to hold or propagate their beliefs. He errs in thinking that *Pastor Aeternus* requires formal definition of a doctrine of

faith or morals in order for a pope to teach infallibly. It does not. It requires that the pope should *determine* or *delineate* the doctrine. This is the meaning of *definit* in the Latin text.

<Romanum Pontificem, cum ex cathedra loquitur, id est, cum omnium Christianorum pastoris et doctoris munere fungens pro suprema sua Apostolica auctoritate doctrinam de fide vel moribus ab universa Ecclesia tenendam definit, per assistentiam divinam ipsi in beato Petro promissam, ea infallibilitate pollere, qua divinus Redemptor Ecclesiam suam in definienda doctrina de fide vel moribus instructam esse voluit; ideoque eiusmodi Romani Pontificis definitiones ex sese, non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae, irreformabiles esse.>

Thus, the teaching of Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*, as that of John Paul II in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, is infallible teaching, though in neither is there any question of formal definition.

Fr Harrison is right to draw attention to the different categories of commitment required of the Catholic faithful, but he is wrong in neglecting to mention the dilemma that confronts them as they weigh the questionable authority of the teaching in *Dignitatis Humanae* against the infallible teaching of Pius IX and Leo XIII which it contradicts.

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One who realises that Vatican II *was not* an ecumenical council of the Church has the key to the solution of the manifold evils that have beset Christ's Church and her faithful people for more than forty years. He understands that its teachings were not necessarily infallible; its determinations not necessarily certain. He recognises that it is open to the Pope or his successor to review, or to convoke an ecumenical council to review, each of them.

The present author has been criticised as schismatic for his refusal to endorse what might be called 'the party line' about Vatican II within the body of the faithful. He denies the allegation. The arguments he has put here (and elsewhere) are advanced by one who is bound by his baptism to expose error and to seek the truth. They are advanced not in defiance of, but subject to, the ruling of the Catholic Church.

God, since He is supremely good, would in no wise allow something of evil to be in His works were He not good and omnipotent even up to this point, as to bring forth good even from evil. [St Augustine, *Enchiridion* xi] Almighty God will not long allow error to cast its pernicious shadow over His Church. The author is confident that it is only a matter of time before He stirs the Pope and bishops of His Church to recognise the shortcomings of Vatican II, and to resolve them.

Michael Baker

14th September 2010—*The Exaltation of the Holy Cross*