

## POPE BENEDICT'S DEFENCE OF VATICAN II

It was inevitable that those who have been immersed in the *novus ordo* and in the mind-set of the Second Vatican Council would react adversely to the recent radical criticism of the Council and its most controversial document, the Declaration on Religious Freedom, by Bishops Schneider and Viganò. Rome's commentator, Sandro Magister, has asserted that Archbishop Viganò is "on the brink of schism". This amounts to what we, in Australia, would call playing the man not the ball, arguing *ad hominem* instead of *ad rem*. It is an argument the Archbishop has been able to refute with ease.

Magister's argument *ad rem* seems to be grounded in the assumption that the magisterium of the Church is constituted exclusively by the teaching in Vatican II, and that one who rejects any of its elements must be regarded as rejecting the authority of the Church. He quotes from the December 2005 address of Pope Benedict XVI to the Vatican Curia, material that might be termed *the Ratzinger apologia* for the Council, it being recalled that Fr Josef Ratzinger was one of the Council's *periti*, theological adviser to Cardinal Josef Cardinal Frings, Archbishop of Cologne, *inter alios*. A copy of the extract is reproduced in the appendix.

The problem with any reliance on this document is that in canon law, and indeed in any system of posited law, a document that has legal force stands on its own feet and is to be interpreted in accordance with its terms. It is not to be interpreted in the light of the cogitations of a commentator, even one who may have had a hand in its composition.<sup>1</sup> It does not matter what those who influenced the Council may have intended; what matters is the terms of the documents themselves. The Ratzinger apologia is not part of the Church's magisterium.

Yet Sandro Magister's citation gives us an opportunity to analyse its content.

### *The Apologia*

The former Pope appeals, as he has done elsewhere, to the need to interpret the Council with 'a hermeneutic of continuity'. This begs an answer to the question: *Why does the Second Vatican Council need one?* As Archbishop Viganò has said in a recent contribution to the debate (July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020), "Anyone with common sense can see that it is an absurdity to want to *interpret* a Council, since it is and ought to be a clear and unequivocal norm of Faith and Morals." There was never a need to interpret the Council of Trent, or the first Vatican Council as continuous with the Church's constant teachings. Why has it been found necessary to interpret Vatican II in accord with those teachings? As Dr Peter Kwasniewski points out, it is because of "the mixture, the jumble, of great, good, indifferent, bad, generic, ambiguous, problematic, erroneous, all of it at enormous length," to be found in the Council's documents.<sup>2</sup>

Truth (logical truth) does not vary with the passing of the centuries or with the alteration of historical conditions, because its measure, reality, is fixed and objective. Truth (logical truth)

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<sup>1</sup> In the play, *A Man for All Seasons*, the author, Robert Bolt, has his hero, Sir Thomas More, ask of his son-in-law Will Roper the terms of Henry VIII's new Act imposing an oath on his subjects to acknowledge the licit-ness of his marriage with Anne Boleyn. Roper is contemptuous of the terms of the Act but More in response puts the issue in a single sentence: "[The Act] will mean what the words say".

<sup>2</sup> *Why Viganò's Critique of the Council must be taken seriously*, June 29, 2020— [https://onepeterfive.com/vigano-critique-council/#\\_edn4](https://onepeterfive.com/vigano-critique-council/#_edn4)

is, and never ceases to be, the identity between what is asserted and reality. The apologia expresses a different view. The truth expressed in the paragraphs of Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* was not to be rejected because a later body of thinkers, of which young Fr Ratzinger was one, chose to interpret it as "a bitter and radical condemnation of [the] spirit of the modern age". The age deserved to be condemned but there was nothing bitter about its condemnation. The *Syllabus* provided the medicine of mercy to a people blind as to their eternal destiny by spelling out the truth. To adopt the position that that solemn document was somehow reprehensible for doing so was to embrace logical relativism, an evil which the former Cardinal Ratzinger has been happy to condemn in other contexts.

A second problem, allied with the first, is the former Pope's misrepresentation (taken objectively, not subjectively) of the *Syllabus's* magisterial force. The rejection of the *Syllabus* was a common theme among the Council *periti* who coupled their refusal to acknowledge this inconvenient document with selective quoting—to the point of active misrepresentation—of the words of Leo XIII in its support as, for instance, those in his signal encyclical on human liberty, *Libertas praestantissimum* (June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1888). Leo provided a critical commentary on those elements in the *Syllabus* which condemned the errors derived from Rousseau, Voltaire and their ilk which resulted in the appalling excesses of the French Revolution. It was the Council bishops' refusal to do in *Dignitatis Humanae* what the great Pope had done in *Libertas*, namely, to distinguish freedom into its categories of *absolute* and *moral* freedom, and highlight the differences between them, which facilitated their descent into the errors with which that document is replete.

The former Pope endeavours to whitewash the American application of the dysfunctional thinking of the French philosophes. He is silent about Leo XIII's criticisms of the United States' clergy for treating the situation in their country as ideal in the encyclicals *Longinqua Oceani* (January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1895) and *Testem Benevolentiae* (January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1899) as, for instance, this:

"[I]t would be very erroneous to conclude that in America is to be sought the type of status most desirable for the Church, or that it would be universally lawful or expedient for State and Church to be, as in America, dissevered and divorced... [The Church] would bring forth more abundant fruits if, in addition to liberty, she enjoyed the favour of the laws and the patronage of public authority."

Again, the teaching of the magisterium proved inconvenient to the novel theories promoted by the Council's *periti* who favoured the separation of Church and State which secular (i.e., Godless) influences in the world had imposed on its peoples through moral force, as they had favoured the chimera of 'religious freedom'. The *periti*, looking to the popular will expressed in the American experience, thought the secular mind more important than the Church's authority. It mattered not that the enthusiasm which underlay the adoption of those principles was Masonic and anti-Catholic, or that it had previously been rejected trenchantly by the Church. The *periti* knew better!<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> There is an irony here. As head of the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, Cardinal Ratzinger had upheld the Church's continuing opposition to Freemasonry against those who maintained that the condemnations in the 1917 CIC had been removed in the 1983 edition.

There is only one valid meaning of the phrase ‘religious freedom’ and that is where it is used to signify the moral freedom of a man to embrace the one true religion on earth founded by Almighty God (*Libertas*, n. 19). This religion, as Leo XIII says in a number of places, is readily discoverable by anyone of good will who investigates the issues (e.g., *Libertas*, n. 20). Every other appeal to ‘religious freedom’ is flawed because it replaces *moral* freedom in the expression with *absolute* freedom and says, effectively, *a man is morally free to follow the religion of his choice*. The fundamental flaw in *Dignitatis Humanae* lies in the bishops’ confusion of absolute freedom on the issue with moral freedom.

The inevitable concomitant of this failure was that they taught not only that people have a right to embrace error *but that the Church should support that ‘right’!* St Thomas quotes St Ambrose with approval, *Omne verum, a quocumque dicatur, a Spiritu Sancto est*. “Every truth, no matter by whom it may be said, is from the Holy Spirit.”<sup>4</sup> It is impossible that any error could derive from the Holy Spirit. The teaching of this double error in *Dignitatis Humanae* demonstrates that it is impossible the Council operated under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

The failure to realise the duplicity underlying the use of the expression explains why appeals to ‘religious freedom’ against the draconian actions of governments throughout the world have proved so ineffectual ever since. The former Pope’s enthusiasm for peoples’ rights to embrace any religion or ideology is delusional and in breach of Catholic truth.

Much of Pope Benedict’s apologia is written in code and not easy to understand. After a number of questionable prefatory averments, he asserts elliptically that “three circles of questions had formed” at the time of the Council, which “were expecting an answer”, each of them involving a change of the Church’s perception. They concerned the relationships between faith and science, between Church and State (“the modern state”), and between the Christian faith and world religions. He does not say who was expecting these answers but one can safely assume it was those who desired a change from the Church’s perennial teaching on each of these issues.

After this comes a strange sentence: he asserts that it is in “a combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels that the very nature of true reform consists”. Those with some knowledge of the history of philosophy will recognise the Hegelian subtext—the warring of thesis and antithesis producing synthesis. The mentality behind this perception is that the Church’s doctrine must evolve, a Modernist contention as anyone will discover who reads Pius X’s *Pascendi* (September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1907). Consistent with this approach Ratzinger asserts that while “the principles... express the permanent aspect... the practical forms that depend on the historical situation... are subject to change”. In other words, changing times demand changing answers and principles are not to be regarded as sacrosanct. The postulates here expressed, then, are—

1. there must be reform; and
2. if principles stand in the way, they must be bypassed.

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<sup>4</sup> In a number of places; e.g., *De Veritate* I, q. 1, art. viii, sed contra.

All of which begs an answer to the question — *Why?* Why was change in the Church's position on these various issues something the *periti* thought desirable?

Let us now look at three of the paragraphs that follow and endeavour to expose their meaning. Here is the first:

“Thus... if religious freedom were to be considered an expression of the human inability to discover the truth and thus become a canonization of relativism, then this social and historical necessity is raised inappropriately to the metaphysical level and thus stripped of its true meaning. Consequently, it cannot be accepted by those who believe that the human person is capable of knowing the truth about God and, on the basis of the inner dignity of the truth, is bound to this knowledge. It is quite different... to perceive religious freedom as a need that derives from human coexistence, or indeed, as an intrinsic consequence of the truth that cannot be externally imposed but that the person must adopt only through the process of conviction. ”

This is as obscure in meaning as the worst of the oeuvre of Pope John Paul II but one thing is plain: he is according moral force to a man's *absolute* freedom about religion.

Let us spell out the importance of the distinction. A man is *absolutely* free to kill his unborn child; he is not *morally* free to do so. He is *absolutely* free to follow a religion other than the one true religion established by God. He is not *morally* free to do so. Why? Because morality concerns a man's ultimate end which is union with God, and in each case the action contemplated detracts from its attainment. No merely earthly religion can secure a man's ultimate end. His striving for the truth may lead him from one system of belief to another until, finally, he arrives at the right one. He is *morally* free to conduct that search, because he is acting in the light of the end, but he has no *moral* right to settle on any merely earthly based belief before he reaches it.

Now the second:

“The Second Vatican Council, recognizing and making its own an essential principle of the modern State with the Decree on Religious Freedom, has recovered the deepest patrimony of the Church. By so doing she can be conscious of being in full harmony with the teaching of Jesus himself (cf. Mt 22: 21), as well as with the Church of the martyrs of all time...

These sentences embrace a contradiction in terms which reflects the contradiction in *Dignitatis Humanae*. The “deepest patrimony of the Church” has insisted since Christ first taught that God is to be worshipped in spirit and in truth (*John* 4: 24) through His Son Jesus Christ, and that, *and only that*, is the kind of worshipper God wants (cf. *John* 4: 23). To assert that the Council conformed to this demand by “recognizing and making its own an essential principle of the modern State”, namely, that men should be free to follow any religion of their fancy is nonsense.

The third:

The martyrs of the early Church died for their faith in that God who was revealed in Jesus Christ, and for this very reason they also died for freedom of conscience and the freedom to profess one's own faith – a profession that no State can impose but which, instead, can only be claimed with God's grace in freedom of conscience. A missionary Church known for proclaiming her message to all peoples must necessarily work for the freedom of the faith. She desires to transmit the gift of the truth that exists for one and all.

There is no other God but the “God who was revealed in Jesus Christ”. An impartial reader of his first sentence would be justified in thinking that Pope Benedict was in doubt about the matter. In what follows, he repeats the sleight of hand that characterised Bishop Emile de Smedt’s *relatio* to the Council’s bishops, the speech that led to *Dignitatis Humanae*,<sup>5</sup> confusing the freedom to profess *any faith* with the freedom to profess *the one true faith* established by Almighty God.

He does the same with conscience. A man must be true to his conscience, it is true; but first—the Church has always insisted—he must have a rightly-formed conscience, one grounded in the truth of God’s revelation and the natural law. No man is entitled to exalt the demands of his conscience above the law of God. The martyrs of the early Church did not die “for the freedom of conscience and the freedom to profess one’s own faith”. To say so is to advance the Protestant claim of the superiority of conscience in any setting; to reduce their self-immolation to that of a John Hus or a Thomas Cranmer who died rejecting God’s authority in favour of their own. The early martyrs died for the only true faith among innumerable earthly ones, that established by Almighty God through His Son Jesus Christ.

### *Its Defects*

The root problem with Papa Ratzinger’s analysis is that his theology lacks a grounding in the Church’s metaphysics. He is, as he has been since his formation, a proponent of the Modernist inspired *nouvelle théologie* condemned by Pius XII in *Humani Generis* (August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1950). Fr Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange O.P. (doyen of what was later the *Pontifical University of St Thomas Aquinas*) who coined the term of its proponents, asked in the course of his criticism: “How can an unchanging truth maintain itself if the two notions united by the verb ‘to be’ are essentially variable or changeable?”

Pope Benedict thinks the evidence of history is determinative because he has difficulties with the distinction between the contingent and the necessary. History is a record of the *contingent* application at different times of what is *necessary* (i.e., fixed). He elevates to a station beyond its competence, as Pope John Paul II did before him, the subsidiary science of anthropology. The Church does not inform herself in ultimate matters by looking at sciences that deal only with the particular, and that at no higher level than the experimental. She informs herself through the science that addresses ultimate causes, philosophy, and theology which has the ultimate cause, God, as its subject—sciences rooted not in the physical but in the metaphysical. His reasoning, often as confused and confusing as that of his predecessor, is difficult to follow for the very good reason that it does not reflect reality.

The curse of the age is subjectivism according to which truth is determined not by reality but by opinion. The *nouvelle théologie* exemplifies subjectivism’s logical and philosophical defects. Instead of conforming their thinking to the Church’s teaching, its proponents sought to conform the Church’s teaching to their thinking. To achieve its ends the movement had

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<sup>5</sup> For a critical analysis of the *relatio* and of Bishop de Smedt’s misrepresentations see the author’s paper ‘*Religious Liberty and the Development of Doctrine*’ at [http://www.superflumina.org/PDF\\_files/relig\\_liberty\\_doctrine.pdf](http://www.superflumina.org/PDF_files/relig_liberty_doctrine.pdf)

recourse to poor reasoning, to logical contradiction and, where necessary, to downright dishonesty. These characteristics may be seen in the Ratzinger apologia.

### *The Man*

The world is forever changing, an inevitable effect of its constitution from matter, for matter is the principle of alteration in things. The Church, in contrast, shows herself unchanging, reflecting in this the abiding character of her Founder, Almighty God, the unchanging. It is the constant complaint of her detractors that the Church, fixed in her views and in her teachings, will not change with the times. It was this character that so offended the enthusiasts for the *nouvelle théologie*. In their enthusiasm for peace and conciliation between the opposed parties of State and Church, those who dominated the Council thought it no loss to compromise, or to abandon completely, the rights of the institution founded by Almighty God for men's salvation. The betrayal of their oaths of allegiance to Christ and His Church this entailed never troubled them for they could only view these through the jaundiced lens of their collective prejudice.

On his elevation to the office of pope many among the orthodox thought Cardinal Ratzinger the solution to the problems that had beset Christ's Church for forty years. There were many good actions he performed which seemed to bear out this expectation, in particular his formal recognition in the motu proprio *Summorum Pontificum* (July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007), of the truth that the Mass of the *usus antiquior* had never been abrogated. Like Papa Wojtyla before him he seemed, as he got older, to have thrown off many of the intellectual aberrations of his earlier days as student and priest. Yet his abandonment of the office of Pope demonstrated what had long been suspected by many, that he was never going to be the solution to the problems for the simple reason that he had always been part of them.

One who assumes the office of the papacy becomes a father to all the faithful. No father can deny the reality of his fatherhood. But Papa Ratzinger's defective formation made it inevitable that he should think it within his power to treat the Petrine office as something contingent, something he could repudiate at will. His decision to do so is, as Robert de Mattei said recently, one of the most catastrophic events of our century, as it opened the door, not only to a destructive pontificate, but above all to a situation of increasing chaos in the Church.<sup>6</sup>

Michael Baker

July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020—*Our Lady of Mt Carmel*

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<sup>6</sup> *The Unknowns at the End of a Pontificate*—<https://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2020/07/de-mattei-unknowns-at-end-of-pontificate.html#more>

## APPENDIX

Extract from the Address of Pope Benedict XVI to the Curia, December 22, 2005

[...]

The last event of this year on which I wish to reflect here is the celebration of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council 40 years ago. This memory prompts the question: What has been the result of the Council? Was it well received? What, in the acceptance of the Council, was good and what was inadequate or mistaken? What still remains to be done? No one can deny that in vast areas of the Church the implementation of the Council has been somewhat difficult, even without wishing to apply to what occurred in these years the description that St Basil, the great Doctor of the Church, made of the Church's situation after the Council of Nicea: he compares her situation to a naval battle in the darkness of the storm, saying among other things: "The raucous shouting of those who through disagreement rise up against one another, the incomprehensible chatter, the confused din of uninterrupted clamouring, has now filled almost the whole of the Church, falsifying through excess or failure the right doctrine of the faith..." (*De Spiritu Sancto*, XXX, 77; PG 32, 213 A; SCh 17 ff., p. 524).

We do not want to apply precisely this dramatic description to the situation of the post-conciliar period, yet something from all that occurred is nevertheless reflected in it. The question arises: Why has the implementation of the Council, in large parts of the Church, thus far been so difficult?

Well, it all depends on the correct interpretation of the Council or - as we would say today - on its proper hermeneutics, the correct key to its interpretation and application. The problems in its implementation arose from the fact that two contrary hermeneutics came face to face and quarrelled with each other. One caused confusion, the other, silently but more and more visibly, bore and is bearing fruit.

On the one hand, there is an interpretation that I would call "a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture"; it has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media, and also one trend of modern theology. On the other, there is the "hermeneutic of reform", 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.

The hermeneutic of discontinuity risks ending in a split between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church. It asserts that the texts of the Council as such do not yet express the true spirit of the Council. It claims that they are the result of compromises in which, to reach unanimity, it was found necessary to keep and reconfirm many old things that are now pointless. However, the true spirit of the Council is not to be found in these compromises but instead in the impulses toward the new that are contained in the texts.

These innovations alone were supposed to represent the true spirit of the Council, and starting from and in conformity with them, it would be possible to move ahead. Precisely because the texts would only imperfectly reflect the true spirit of the Council and its newness, it would be necessary to go courageously beyond the texts and make room for the newness in which the Council's deepest intention would be expressed, even if it were still vague.

In a word: it would be necessary not to follow the texts of the Council but its spirit. In this way, obviously, a vast margin was left open for the question on how this spirit should subsequently be defined and room was consequently made for every whim.

The nature of a Council as such is therefore basically misunderstood. In this way, it is considered as a sort of constituent that eliminates an old constitution and creates a new one. However, the Constituent Assembly needs a mandator and then confirmation by the mandator, in other words, the people the constitution must serve. The Fathers had no such mandate and no one had ever given them one; nor could anyone have given them one because the essential constitution of the Church comes from the Lord

and was given to us so that we might attain eternal life and, starting from this perspective, be able to illuminate life in time and time itself.

Through the Sacrament they have received, Bishops are stewards of the Lord's gift. They are "stewards of the mysteries of God" (I Cor 4: 1); as such, they must be found to be "faithful" and "wise" (cf. Lk 12: 41-48). This requires them to administer the Lord's gift in the right way, so that it is not left concealed in some hiding place but bears fruit, and the Lord may end by saying to the administrator: "Since you were dependable in a small matter I will put you in charge of larger affairs" (cf. Mt 25: 14-30; Lk 19: 11-27).

These Gospel parables express the dynamic of fidelity required in the Lord's service; and through them it becomes clear that, as in a Council, the dynamic and fidelity must converge.

The hermeneutic of discontinuity is countered by the hermeneutic of reform, as it was presented first by Pope John XXIII in his Speech inaugurating the Council on 11 October 1962 and later by Pope Paul VI in his Discourse for the Council's conclusion on 7 December 1965.

Here I shall cite only John XXIII's well-known words, which unequivocally express this hermeneutic when he says that the Council wishes "to transmit the doctrine, pure and integral, without any attenuation or distortion". And he continues: "Our duty is not only to guard this precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our era demands of us..." It is necessary that "adherence to all the teaching of the Church in its entirety and preciseness..." be presented in "faithful and perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another...", retaining the same meaning and message (*The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, S.J., p. 715).

It is clear that this commitment to expressing a specific truth in a new way demands new thinking on this truth and a new and vital relationship with it; it is also clear that new words can only develop if they come from an informed understanding of the truth expressed, and on the other hand, that a reflection on faith also requires that this faith be lived. In this regard, the programme that Pope John XXIII proposed was extremely demanding, indeed, just as the synthesis of fidelity and dynamic is demanding.

However, wherever this interpretation guided the implementation of the Council, new life developed and new fruit ripened. Forty years after the Council, we can show that the positive is far greater and livelier than it appeared to be in the turbulent years around 1968. Today, we see that although the good seed developed slowly, it is nonetheless growing; and our deep gratitude for the work done by the Council is likewise growing.

In his Discourse closing the Council, Paul VI pointed out a further specific reason why a hermeneutic of discontinuity can seem convincing.

In the great dispute about man which marks the modern epoch, the Council had to focus in particular on the theme of anthropology. It had to question the relationship between the Church and her faith on the one hand, and man and the contemporary world on the other (cf. *ibid.*). The question becomes even clearer if, instead of the generic term "contemporary world", we opt for another that is more precise: the Council had to determine in a new way the relationship between the Church and the modern era.

This relationship had a somewhat stormy beginning with the Galileo case. It was then totally interrupted when Kant described "religion within pure reason" and when, in the radical phase of the French Revolution, an image of the State and the human being that practically no longer wanted to allow the Church any room was disseminated.

In the 19th century under Pius IX, the clash between the Church's faith and a radical liberalism and the natural sciences, which also claimed to embrace with their knowledge the whole of reality to its limit,



stubbornly proposing to make the "hypothesis of God" superfluous, had elicited from the Church a bitter and radical condemnation of this spirit of the modern age. Thus, it seemed that there was no longer any milieu open to a positive and fruitful understanding, and the rejection by those who felt they were the representatives of the modern era was also drastic.

In the meantime, however, the modern age had also experienced developments. People came to realize that the American Revolution was offering a model of a modern State that differed from the theoretical model with radical tendencies that had emerged during the second phase of the French Revolution.

The natural sciences were beginning to reflect more and more clearly their own limitations imposed by their own method, which, despite achieving great things, was nevertheless unable to grasp the global nature of reality.

So it was that both parties were gradually beginning to open up to each other. In the period between the two World Wars and especially after the Second World War, Catholic statesmen demonstrated that a modern secular State could exist that was not neutral regarding values but alive, drawing from the great ethical sources opened by Christianity.

Catholic social doctrine, as it gradually developed, became an important model between radical liberalism and the Marxist theory of the State. The natural sciences, which without reservation professed a method of their own to which God was barred access, realized ever more clearly that this method did not include the whole of reality. Hence, they once again opened their doors to God, knowing that reality is greater than the naturalistic method and all that it can encompass.

It might be said that three circles of questions had formed which then, at the time of the Second Vatican Council, were expecting an answer. First of all, the relationship between faith and modern science had to be redefined. Furthermore, this did not only concern the natural sciences but also historical science for, in a certain school, the historical-critical method claimed to have the last word on the interpretation of the Bible and, demanding total exclusivity for its interpretation of Sacred Scripture, was opposed to important points in the interpretation elaborated by the faith of the Church.

Secondly, it was necessary to give a new definition to the relationship between the Church and the modern State that would make room impartially for citizens of various religions and ideologies, merely assuming responsibility for an orderly and tolerant coexistence among them and for the freedom to practise their own religion.

Thirdly, linked more generally to this was the problem of religious tolerance - a question that required a new definition of the relationship between the Christian faith and the world religions. In particular, before the recent crimes of the Nazi regime and, in general, with a retrospective look at a long and difficult history, it was necessary to evaluate and define in a new way the relationship between the Church and the faith of Israel.

These are all subjects of great importance - they were the great themes of the second part of the Council - on which it is impossible to reflect more broadly in this context. It is clear that in all these sectors, which all together form a single problem, some kind of discontinuity might emerge. Indeed, a discontinuity had been revealed but in which, after the various distinctions between concrete historical situations and their requirements had been made, the continuity of principles proved not to have been abandoned. It is easy to miss this fact at a first glance.

It is precisely in this combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels that the very nature of true reform consists. In this process of innovation in continuity we must learn to understand more practically than before that the Church's decisions on contingent matters - for example, certain practical forms of liberalism or a free interpretation of the Bible - should necessarily be contingent themselves, precisely because they refer to a specific reality that is changeable in itself. It was necessary to learn to recognize that in these decisions it is only the principles that express the permanent aspect, since they remain as an undercurrent, motivating decisions from within.

On the other hand, not so permanent are the practical forms that depend on the historical situation and are therefore subject to change.

Basic decisions, therefore, continue to be well-grounded, whereas the way they are applied to new contexts can change. Thus, for example, if religious freedom were to be considered an expression of the human inability to discover the truth and thus become a canonization of relativism, then this social and historical necessity is raised inappropriately to the metaphysical level and thus stripped of its true meaning. Consequently, it cannot be accepted by those who believe that the human person is capable of knowing the truth about God and, on the basis of the inner dignity of the truth, is bound to this knowledge.

It is quite different, on the other hand, to perceive religious freedom as a need that derives from human coexistence, or indeed, as an intrinsic consequence of the truth that cannot be externally imposed but that the person must adopt only through the process of conviction.

The Second Vatican Council, recognizing and making its own an essential principle of the modern State with the Decree on Religious Freedom, has recovered the deepest patrimony of the Church. By so doing she can be conscious of being in full harmony with the teaching of Jesus himself (cf. Mt 22: 21), as well as with the Church of the martyrs of all time. The ancient Church naturally prayed for the emperors and political leaders out of duty (cf. I Tm 2: 2); but while she prayed for the emperors, she refused to worship them and thereby clearly rejected the religion of the State.

The martyrs of the early Church died for their faith in that God who was revealed in Jesus Christ, and for this very reason they also died for freedom of conscience and the freedom to profess one's own faith - a profession that no State can impose but which, instead, can only be claimed with God's grace in freedom of conscience. A missionary Church known for proclaiming her message to all peoples must necessarily work for the freedom of the faith. She desires to transmit the gift of the truth that exists for one and all.

At the same time, she assures peoples and their Governments that she does not wish to destroy their identity and culture by doing so, but to give them, on the contrary, a response which, in their innermost depths, they are waiting for - a response with which the multiplicity of cultures is not lost but instead unity between men and women increases and thus also peace between peoples.

The Second Vatican Council, with its new definition of the relationship between the faith of the Church and certain essential elements of modern thought, has reviewed or even corrected certain historical decisions, but in this apparent discontinuity it has actually preserved and deepened her inmost nature and true identity.

The Church, both before and after the Council, was and is the same Church, one, holy, catholic and apostolic, journeying on through time; she continues "her pilgrimage amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God", proclaiming the death of the Lord until he comes (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 8).

Those who expected that with this fundamental "yes" to the modern era all tensions would be dispelled and that the "openness towards the world" accordingly achieved would transform everything into pure harmony, had underestimated the inner tensions as well as the contradictions inherent in the modern epoch.

They had underestimated the perilous frailty of human nature which has been a threat to human progress in all the periods of history and in every historical constellation. These dangers, with the new possibilities and new power of man over matter and over himself, did not disappear but instead acquired new dimensions: a look at the history of the present day shows this clearly.

In our time too, the Church remains a "sign that will be opposed" (Lk 2: 34) - not without reason did Pope John Paul II, then still a Cardinal, give this title to the theme for the Spiritual Exercises he preached in 1976 to Pope Paul VI and the Roman Curia. The Council could not have intended to abolish the Gospel's opposition to human dangers and errors.

On the contrary, it was certainly the Council's intention to overcome erroneous or superfluous contradictions in order to present to our world the requirement of the Gospel in its full greatness and purity.

The steps the Council took towards the modern era which had rather vaguely been presented as "openness to the world", belong in short to the perennial problem of the relationship between faith and reason that is re-emerging in ever new forms. The situation that the Council had to face can certainly be compared to events of previous epochs.

In his First Letter, St Peter urged Christians always to be ready to give an answer (*apologia*) to anyone who asked them for the *logos*, the reason for their faith (cf. 3: 15).

This meant that biblical faith had to be discussed and come into contact with Greek culture and learn to recognize through interpretation the separating line but also the convergence and the affinity between them in the one reason, given by God.

When, in the 13th century through the Jewish and Arab philosophers, Aristotelian thought came into contact with Medieval Christianity formed in the Platonic tradition and faith and reason risked entering an irreconcilable contradiction, it was above all St Thomas Aquinas who mediated the new encounter between faith and Aristotelian philosophy, thereby setting faith in a positive relationship with the form of reason prevalent in his time. There is no doubt that the wearing dispute between modern reason and the Christian faith, which had begun negatively with the Galileo case, went through many phases, but with the Second Vatican Council the time came when broad new thinking was required.

Its content was certainly only roughly traced in the conciliar texts, but this determined its essential direction, so that the dialogue between reason and faith, particularly important today, found its bearings on the basis of the Second Vatican Council.

This dialogue must now be developed with great open-mindedness but also with that clear discernment that the world rightly expects of us in this very moment. Thus, today we can look with gratitude at the Second Vatican Council: if we interpret and implement it guided by a right hermeneutic, it can be and can become increasingly powerful for the ever necessary renewal of the Church...

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