

The “Hermeneutics of Continuity”

It's time for a rational, open-minded approach to the “hermeneutics of continuity.” The hermeneutics of continuity is a topic very much occupying the Church at this time, and appropriately so, for it means to bridge the rift between proponents of Vatican I and Vatican II. The perceived discontinuity between the Councils is a schism between the ecclesiologies of the two Councils.

Conflicts center on the role of the laity, on attitudes toward Modernity, and on the co-dependency of faith and reason. Vatican I endorsed what was the traditional top-down hierarchical model, while Vatican II allowed more participatory ownership of authority, of collegial relationship of popes and bishops, and need for Church-updating and inclusion of truths scientifically discerned. Fresh air from the “open windows” of Vatican II inspired the Liberation Theology movement, which provoked a retaliatory response by Pope John Paul II, namely, his appointment of replacement bishops who held to the Vatican I model against Liberation Theology. The People of God need liberation from its “Religious Paralysis Syndrome.”

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In brief, the conflict between the Councils comes down to this: Vatican I proponents say nothing changed after Vatican II, Vatican II proponents say everything changed. What is proposed here is to establish that both are right, but not for the same reasons, and that what developed in the Church between the Councils was development toward a continuity process of reconciling scriptural hermeneutics and faith orthodoxy to norms of scientific methods and the certification of truth..

The continuity between reason and faith is the bridge for the continuity of science and religion, and the continuity of science and religion is the bridge for the continuity of Vatican I and Vatican II. Vatican II proceeded under the principle: “faith supposes reason as grace supposes nature,” (John Courtney, SJ.) Reason, as the supposition of faith, evolved out of the enlightenment consciousness after the Protestant Reformation and the accelerated expansion of scientific methods and knowledge.

German Lutheran theologians developed scientific methods for interpreting Scriptures; first official Catholic response was negative until Pope Pius XII published his encyclical “Divino Afflante Spiritu.” In his encyclical Pius XII reinforced the notion that scientific methods should indeed be used in the hermeneutics of Scriptures. Pius XII recognized that conditions of the times, local circumstances of the writer, politics, culture and prevailing philosophies, all influenced the content and intent of individual scriptures and writers. This norm of reason, for discerning truth in Scriptural interpretation, was an important continuity shift from delusional reliance on faith in clerical authority.

In the early church, Bishop Irenaeus with fellow bishops decided for the church then, and for future Church, that a plurality of bishops could decide what orthodoxy is and what the faithful had to accept under penalty of sin. "Continuity" in this traditional model means that all new orthodoxy has to tie back to the old if would preserve orthodoxy. To modern consciousness, this is an incestuous expectation of closed-minded control. What needs to be explored is the weight and role of the "continuity of science", also, as it pertains to the "continuity of orthodoxy?"

In fairness to bishops seeking to preserve the integrity of orthodoxy at the time of early Church, the underlying rationale of orthodoxy they proclaimed presumed the "science" of their time. The "continuity of orthodoxy" requires acceptance that the grounding of first orthodoxy presumed the science of the static-centrist worldview, which worldview continues in traditional Church culture until now. On premises of the muddled times, Pope Pius IX condemned modernity (especially evolution), and the Vatican I Fathers rubber-stamped his claim of infallibility. The dire world and political circumstances of the time and the particular animus of Pius IX imposed heavily on the judgment of the bishops. The Pope was under imminent threat of losing his Papal States Kingdom, and in fact did lose it, and he became a "Prisoner of the Vatican." Pope Leo XIII, successor to Pius IX came to recognize there would be no recovering the Papal States; thus, he redirected the attention of the Church to the Gospel of Peace and Justice, which was developing in other Christian churches (Cf: Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Social Gospel*, 1908)

Vatican II retrieved scientific methodology also with respect to the hermeneutics of conciliar deliberations, even as Pope Pius XII had done for the hermeneutics of Scripture. The Council recognized the "sensus fidelium" which accepts the science of evolution. So how can bishops round out the square box of their making to fit evolution's peg? The "hermeneutics of continuity" makes sense if it includes the expectation that the continuity of science applies also to understandings of conciliar intentions. Between the absolute condemnation of evolution and acceptance of evolution there is no continuity, except if both seek factual truths of science to reconcile differences.

The norms of truth are so paramount to credibility that no method or technique should be excluded that can add to the clarity and applicability of truth. Surely, everyone interested in the advancement and application of truth would want to include any method or test of time that clarifies and enlarges on truth. It must be recognized that the muddle of the times not only obscure matters of science yet unrevealed, but also errs albeit in good faith by bringing forward from the past factual mistakes of assumption and presumption. To err is human, and humans will err no matter in what venue they operate.

History and human nature testify to life's mysteries and to truths that come to light slowly over time, and a bit at a time. It is not inconsistent with the "hermeneutics of continuity" to acknowledge this fact and accept clarifications that informed science brings to understandings previously misinformed. A muddle of consciousness and ideological conflicts prevailed inside and outside the Church at the time of Vatican I, so hasty judgments made under pressure certainly reflect the disturbed times.

With respect to pursuit of the "hermeneutics of continuity" and reconciliation of the two Vatican Councils, it is consistent with factual truth to acknowledge the heat and intolerance of the time, and that under the circumstances less than fully informed judgments would be made. In the matter of faith understandings, evolving rationality is scientifically established as it bears on consciousness and practical living.

The respect of Church for evolution needs to be evaluated in the light of the "hermeneutics of continuity." To do less is to frustrate the "continuity of hermeneutics." The least norms of integral truth require nothing less than new "analysis and synthesis" of faith correlations with evolution, a "matter as important as can be." (Vatican II, Constitution IV, *Gaudium et spes*, Introduction, No. 5)

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