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On the Tasks of Today's Theologian

by Henry O. Widdicombe

ABSTRACT:

This piece was written as a reading response paper for Kristin Colberg's Documents of Vatican II course in the Spring of 2022. It argues that today's theologian must take seriously the demands of the Second Vatican Council and that the task of the theologian is, in light of contemporary culture, offer an ever-new articulation of the Gospel of Christ Jesus that does not lose its ever-ancient truths. In that vein, the piece utilizes the assigned readings for a particular course meeting to, with the aid of Bernard Lonergan, outline a kind of pro-Vatican II panegyric.

SYNOD:

As the global Church progresses further in the Synod on Synodality, today's theologian must be both a voice that faithfully articulates the teachings of the Church in a contemporary mode but also someone who lifts up the voices of those around them. As we walk together on this journey of life, many gifts are given to the many peoples of the Church and it is only in harmonious chorus, and not in discordant cacophony, that the pilgrim People of God give right praise and live justly together.



“Since Christianity draws its reality from history and not from some metaphysics, the theologian must have as his primary concern ... to know this history and to train himself in it.”¹

Marie-Dominique Chenu, OP

“...conversion is not a set of propositions that a theologian utters, but a fundamental and momentous change in the reality that a theologian is.”²

Bernard Lonergan, SJ

My mentor oft remarked to me that theology is always a withdrawal into the world of theory for the sake of a return to the world of Christian discipleship and pastoral ministry. Theological reflection begins and ends in religious experience, that of oneself and of those to whom one ministers. Pope Francis remarked similarly, albeit in reference to Vatican II, in an address to a theological conference in Argentina in September of 2015 saying, “One of the main contributions of the Second Vatican Council was precisely seeking a way to overcome the divorce between theology and pastoral care...”³

What they both, rightly, emphasize is that the vocation of the theologian begins in the experience of being a member of the Christian community and is ordered toward preaching the Gospel, especially a Gospel re-read “in the light of contemporary culture.”⁴ Vatican II, at least for today’s theologian, is the spark for seeking a renewed expression of the Gospel, but the ultimate end is the “dynamic reading of the Gospel, actualizing its message for today.”⁵ The activity of theology begins and ends in the Gospel, particularly a personal encounter with Christ Jesus as mediated through Word and Sacrament in the context of the Christian community gathered together in a concrete time and place. Bernard Lonergan posits, at the beginning of *Method in Theology*, that “theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role

1 O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II?* 36.

2 Lonergan, *Method in Theology*. 270.

3 Martin, “Second Vatican Council.” 173.

4 Martin. 172.

5 Martin. 172.

of a religion in that matrix.⁶ Therefore, the responsibility of the theologian, in light of Vatican II, is expressing the Gospel message in the cultural context in which they are situated.

Furthermore, the Second Vatican Council was, for the Church, a moment of real reinvigoration—one might even refer to it as “conversion.” Pope John XXIII famously referred to it as a “throwing open” of the windows of the Church, both to let the dust out and the Spirit in. It was and is positively striking to claim both that the Church had both accrued, over time, to itself that which could be called dust and that it was in need of the intervention of the Holy Spirit, who had been, as the quote implies, at least partially absent. John O’Malley, in his book *What Happened at Vatican II?*, outlines a helpful framework from which to approach the council and its texts, especially in applying the notion of conversion to the council, both as a locus of personal conversion and as an instance of conversion itself. He draws attention to the triple hermeneutical lens of *ressourcement*, *aggiornamento*, and *development*. Each of these terms was in use at and around the council and indicates something essential to its character. *Ressourcement* is a reflective investigation into the past, searching out the roots of the Church. *Aggiornamento* is Pope John’s exuberant throwing open of the windows of the Church to let in the modern world. Finally, *development* is the Church looking hopefully toward the future and seeing, in seed form, the ever-new articulation of ever-ancient truths.

For the contemporary theologian, the council is the *sine qua non* as, for the authentic practitioner of the discipline, it can neither be disregarded or rejected as it is absolutely crucial for the Church in the modern world. Without appropriating and working out, in the context of one’s own questioning, the insights of the council, one can hardly call themselves a Catholic theologian. Repeatedly in his work, Lonergan refers to the notion of “authenticity,” which he describes as follows: “... [it] is twofold: there is the minor authenticity of the subject with respect to the tradition that nourishes him; there is the major authenticity that justifies or condemns the tradition itself.”⁷ Thus, for the contemporary Catholic theologian, there is both the minor authenticity which relates them to the broader Catholic tradition and

6 Lonergan, *Method in Theology*. xi.

7 Lonergan, “Existenz and Aggiornamento.” 227.

the authenticity of the council to what preceded it. Rejecting the council is, thus, actual inauthenticity in the individual and alleged inauthenticity in the council.⁸ Thereby, the Catholic theologian must appropriate the council in their own work and also bring it to bear in their own context. In the face of inauthenticity on the part of some adherents of the Catholic faith, often in the name of tradition itself, the theologian must unequivocally state, to steal the words of a famous reformer, "*Hier stehe, ich kann nicht anders.*" The Second Vatican Council is the definitive self-expression of the Church's identity in this time and place.

In conclusion, the theologian of the post-conciliar Church must appropriate the council for the sake of mediating to the world the Gospel message of Christ Jesus. It is their vocation as members of the academic discipline of theology to reflect on religious experience and bring it to bear in their contemporary context. There is no withdrawal for withdrawal's sake, but rather for a return to the world of action, in obedience to the command of Christ to go and tell the Good News to all nations.



8 Josef Cardinal Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, describes this as a hermeneutic of continuity. The council is to be read, fundamentally, contiguous and coherent with the preceding elements of the tradition. The other option is a hermeneutic of rupture, which, in the opinion of this author, deeply misreads the intentions of the Council Fathers and is at odds with the movements of God's own Holy Spirit in the world and in and through the Church.

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