



Polarization within the Church pivots on Vatican II

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Perhaps you have seen the commercial that goes something like this: An apple appears on the screen. The voice-over says, "This is an apple. Some people say it's a banana, but it really is an apple. That's a fact." Well, it is not so simple as that, is it, when it is not the facts themselves but the interpretation of facts that so polarizes us?

We Catholics also are polarized. There is a war of interpretation going on in our Church over religious ideas and practices, the "facts" of our faith. Check Internet discussions about communion in the hand, internal forum, or Pope Francis himself. Our Pope is beloved by many but disliked and opposed strongly by some, including some Bishops and Cardinals. Partly that is because of his allegiance to Vatican II, the Church Council of more than 50 years ago. Vatican II did not just change external things — those "facts" of our religion"; it changed interpretations of the facts, and changed priorities for the externals of our faith, and the Pope is loyal to these interpretations and priorities.

Vatican II insisted that good religious practice needs a solid Scriptural base. What we can know and understand about God is revealed to us within the complexities of Sacred Scripture. Sacred Scripture is written by many authors with different points of view and various cultural biases, who convey their ideas using many different types of writing. So Scripture itself needs interpretation, using methods from Biblical scholars, and so the post Council Church began to retire or make optional things with a weak Scriptural base or things that are significantly culturally biased. For example, older Catholics might remember Tenebrae, limbo, and women being required to wear something on their heads, if only a Kleenex! Unfortunately, many Catholics today still have not learned how to read scripture with its complexities in mind so as to interpret and apply it correctly. Parishes continue to promote Bible Study, and that's a good thing!

Good religious practice also is based on tradition — what has been handed on to us by our Church, from the apostles and first popes until today. Tradition is the second pillar of Catholic belief. But we have more than 2,000 years of tradition. The Second Vatican Council made a choice. It chose to give priority to the centuries closest to the time of Christ. Why? Because it was evident that during these centuries, through the action of the Holy Spirit, the revelation of Jesus Christ was still unfolding. Practices and doctrines reflecting believer's experience of the risen Christ were developing. The Church and its "facticity" was fluid. Two examples: many books about Jesus (gospels), many epistles and other kinds of early Christian writings were widely read and prayed from. It was not until 382 that the list of 27 inspired books of the New Testament (the canon) was agreed on. And it was not until 451 at the Council of Chalcedon that words expressing the full humanity and divinity of Christ were agreed on. Let's call these early centuries the founding era.

The Popes who implemented Vatican II began returning the

Church to practices patterned on that Spirit inspired founding era. Holy Week and the Triduum we have today are based on the liturgy of those early centuries, and so is the conversion process called the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). Mass in the ordinary spoken languages (instead of Latin) and communion in the hand are other examples. "Body of Christ," a phrase that had become narrowed to just the consecrated host, was broadened to include the founding era's understanding of the people of God. The "true presence" of Christ in Eucharist was broadened to include His presence in the assembly itself, in the scriptures proclaimed, in the presiding priest as well as in the consecrated host. Vatican II made laypeople visible again and affirmed that Baptism is the foundation sacrament of discipleship, not Ordination. It insisted that liturgy is public worship, not private prayer. All these changes flowed from the priority given to the founding era. But the importance of the founding era as a guide for present practice has never been fully accepted by some Catholics. And so there is a "retro" movement that attempts to return the Church to practices of medieval times and later eras of our tradition.

Vatican II also made another choice about our long tradition. The Church had always been involved in addressing practical problems of the day. Examples: Benedictines dealt with the influx of immigrants (barbarians) by teaching them to farm. Damage from the continual wars in Europe was mitigated by development of "Just War" theory, based on teachings of Augustine, Bernard, and Thomas Aquinas. Missionary activity developed in response to the discovery of the New World. But in the centuries following the Protestant Reformation, the Church largely turned inward and became increasingly isolated from modern life and issues. Vatican II opted to "open the windows," as Pope St. John XXIII put it. The Church began very publicly to teach and speak about family life, social communications, war and peace, wealth and poverty, and most recently by Pope Francis, the environment. This approach of interaction with the issues of modernity is also an interpretation. It's an interpretation about what a Church is, and a prioritization of what it should be speaking about. And it is not accepted by everyone.

As with politics, so with the Church: it is not only the facts but the interpretations. There were past bloody wars about interpretations regarding the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, to name a few. So perhaps the present polarization in our Church between Vatican II Catholics and those still opposed will produce a new synthesis someday, and not a major schism. If I am loyal to Vatican II like Pope Francis is, I hope it is helpful to see that my loyalty is based on agreeing with the Council: good Church teaching and practice should have a strong foundation in scripture and the traditions of the founding era, and it should speak to issues of our current reality.

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