

The Insufficiency of the Hermeneutic of Continuity

By Dorothea Ludwig-Wang, 15 July 2019

After several decades of doctrinal ambiguity and liturgical experimentation, Pope Benedict XVI reminded the Church that the fundamental content of the deposit of faith cannot be rejected or modified. By introducing the hermeneutic of continuity—the principle that later developments of Church teaching must be read in conformity with past magisterial acts—, he rejected the idea that the Second Vatican Council provided the pope and bishops with *carte blanche* to introduce any innovation that they pleased. Proponents of this hermeneutic identify the root of the current crisis in the Church as the manner in which the texts of the Council were interpreted, based on an ignorance of their actual intent; the texts themselves they deem to be essentially in conformity with Tradition.

It is indisputable that development of doctrine must be read in light of the past, rather than as a rupture with it, and on this point, the hermeneutic of continuity is a thoroughly Catholic idea. However, its supporters within the context of current debates on Vatican II still fail to address the fundamental question: is the content of the Council truly a development of doctrine, or is it, objectively speaking, a rupture with the past that cannot be fixed by an appeal to interpretation? Without going into detail about the specific points on which many theologians have questioned the orthodoxy of the Council documents, the hermeneutic of continuity's ultimate inability to resolve these disputes can be discerned by the simple fact that it is inappropriate to even speak of hermeneutics when it comes to interpreting Council documents, as such documents are not permitted to be ambiguous in the first place.

If Vatican II is already in conformity with Tradition, then why should the texts not be able to speak for themselves to this effect, rendering recourse to interpretation unnecessary? And if the implementation of the Council up until now has been carried out according to a hermeneutic of rupture, what should Catholics make of the other post-conciliar magisterial acts that find their basis in its documents? Without a new interpretation according to the hermeneutic of continuity being imposed by an external source, the existing rupture, which bears the signatures of the post-conciliar popes, would continue to exist in objective reality, according to the interpretation *already* given throughout the past few decades. Rather than defending the Council against those who criticize its documents, the hermeneutic of continuity actually fully vindicates the position of these critics by its very existence in contrast to the hermeneutic of rupture: the fact that there are two hermeneutics at all proves that the Council is ambiguous.

Ambiguity is a theological censure that describes a proposition which may be understood in one or more ways, at least one of which is objectionable.¹ In defining a proposition as ambiguous, theologians do not refer to the fact that it is *subjectively* difficult to comprehend, but that it *objectively* lends itself to different and conflicting interpretations. Ambiguity in a magisterial document is problematic because it contradicts the finality of the magisterium, which means that the magisterium has the final say in telling the faithful what they need to believe to

1 J. Sollier, "Theological Censures," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 3 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908), <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03532a.htm>.

save their souls. Unlike Scripture, which *is* permitted to be ambiguous at times because God has already provided the Church as an infallible interpreter, Tradition is objective and not subject to interpretation. The magisterium acts an intermediary which explains the content of Scripture so that it may be understood in light of the rule of faith, but this means that the magisterial statements part of Tradition must be definitive and able to speak for themselves.

The fact that the magisterium could not make itself properly understood at an ecumenical council, and that decades later, there are still calls for a proper interpretation, shows that Vatican II fundamentally failed in its finality. On some level, this was inevitable, as the Council never intended to define dogma but to simply make Church teaching more accessible to the modern man by updating language. Vatican II was meant to be a hermeneutic *in itself*, not needing to be subject to another hermeneutic whatsoever, and so the very existence of Benedict XVI's proposal illustrates that even the practical, pastoral mission of the Council failed to materialize. For by criticizing those who have interpreted Vatican II in a heterodox manner, proponents of the hermeneutic of continuity by extension criticize many acts of the post-conciliar magisterium, which only raises further doubts about whether the Council was truly in conformity with Tradition to begin with.

It is true that many of the documents have been subjected to an exaggerated and distorted implementation. The widespread abandonment of Latin and Gregorian chant, for example, was never called for by *Sacrosanctum concilium*; in fact, such innovations actually contradict the very document often cited to justify them. Nor does that constitution call for the formulation of a completely new liturgy by committee, yet the *Novus Ordo Missae* is usually cited as one of the most prominent fruits of the Council. While theologians of heterodox schools who were censured prior to the 1960s were responsible for much of the written content of these documents, the blame for the subsequent crisis in the Church cannot be primarily ascribed to them, but only to that very authority which oversaw the implementation of Vatican II, which utterly failed to intervene when abuses occurred, and which even directly sanctioned novelties.

The introduction of a hermeneutic of continuity would not change the fact that in the decades following the Council, its implementation was clearly carried out in accordance with an attitude of rupture and disrespect for Tradition. What this demonstrates is that the ambiguity was a *deliberate* ambiguity, one which could be easily subverted to promote soul-destroying heresies, while the Council itself could still be defended by appealing to a closer reading of the original texts. But the magisterium, the only authority competent to interpret the Council, has authorized, often by papal *fiat*, precisely those actions which are very clear examples of rupture. In a sense, the interpretation of Vatican II has already been given, and the post-conciliar magisterium itself has authorized a hermeneutic of rupture for decades. The proposed hermeneutic of continuity indirectly condemns both that same magisterium which implemented the rupture, as well as the deliberate ambiguity of Vatican II itself that made such an implementation possible.

The only remedy to this crushing blow dealt to the magisterium's credibility by the crisis in the Church is a return to theological distinction. Insofar as the Council simply repeats past Church teaching, it exercises the ordinary magisterium; when it proposes something new in a non-definitive manner, it is simply an exercise of the authentic magisterium and remains non-binding. If nothing else, the hermeneutic of continuity at the very least demonstrates that the

disputed matters are non-infallible, and that settling them one way or the other does not present anything binding upon the consciences of the faithful. There will always be a right to withhold assent on the matters of religious liberty, ecumenism, and collegiality insofar as a “correct” interpretation according to the hermeneutic of continuity has not yet been definitively established. One simply cannot be obliged to assent to an ambiguous formulation of ideas before those ideas are properly clarified and interpreted.

But can those ambiguous formulations of Vatican II truly be “properly” interpreted in any manner that *could* be binding? This seems to be the ultimate objective of those promoting the hermeneutic of continuity, but the non-infallible and pastoral nature of the Council, as expounded above, makes this impossible. Because the Council was a hermeneutic in itself, there could never be semantically stable formulas suitable for every time and place in the future, when the circumstances and pastoral needs of today’s modernity will inevitably be replaced with the new modernity to come. This instability does nothing to promote continuity but can only lead to continued rupture and confusion. The pastoral directives of these documents would have to be constantly reread in light of a *continuous* effort of interpretation, making a binding interpretation impossible, and the Council would become entirely incapable of conveying any definitive meanings, leading a loss of unity in faith and practice.

Many have observed that those who still desperately cling to the unrealistic optimism and enthusiasm of the 1960s have already rendered themselves outdated and foolish-looking. Things have changed dramatically since that era came to pass, and hearkening back to a Council which was indeed a product of its time and circumstances is a lost cause. The documents of Vatican II have long outlived their usefulness; in fact, the turmoil of the past sixty years demonstrated that these initiatives were never very successful to begin with. The experiment of *aggiornamento*—the breath of fresh air that quickly became a hurricane—has been a failed experiment, and it is time to consign the documents of Vatican II to the dustbin of history.