Opinion
Vatican



Pope Paul VI is depicted in a stained-glass window at St. Anthony of Padua Church in East Northport, New York. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Michael Sean Winters

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On Friday, I began my review of Jesuit Fr. Jared Wicks' critically important book *Investigating Vatican II: Its Theologians, Ecumenical Turn and Biblical Commitment*, and I examined the part of the book that dealt with the role of theologians before the council began and in its early days. Today I shall conclude the review.

Wicks writes that "by the end of 1962 the council had defined itself as an organ of broad renewal of the Catholic church," and the book essentially explains what that renewal was about and how it was achieved.

If you ever studied a history of the Second Vatican Council, you know that it was fortuitous the first document considered by the council fathers, the draft text on the decree on the liturgy, had been entrusted to scholars and bishops who had been deeply engaged in liturgical renewal in the middle of the 20th century. The text, after some debate, received an overwhelming vote in favor of its adoption in the early weeks of the council.

And, we know, too, that in assessing the council as a whole, most historians and theologians have begun with either *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, or with *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. But Wicks' book makes a convincing case that it is *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, that really is the lens or filter through which we can best grasp the significance of the other documents promulgated before the council finished its work in 1965. It was this renewed approach to Scripture, and the perceived need to ground the conciliar texts in biblical theology, that informed all of the other decrees.

The conciliar debate on the issue of revelation also demonstrated that the curial position was the minority position. The draft decree on revelation, as seen from its title — *De Fontibus Revelationis* — posited the existence of two sources of revelation, Scripture and tradition. But, the "ressourcement" theologians had demonstrated that there was only one source of revelation, Jesus Christ, who speaks to the church in both the Scriptures and in the tradition. This was no mere semantic

change. The differences in perspective indicated by the differing approaches would prove profound, especially in terms of ecumenical outreach.

When the draft texts, or schemas, were sent to the council fathers six weeks before the council was set to open, the already blind Cardinal Josef Frings of Cologne turned to his theological advisor, Fr. Joseph Ratzinger, to assist him in assessing the drafts and responding to them. Wicks tells the tale:

> Ratzinger, realizing that time was short, composed and typed a Latin letter evaluating the seven schemas. When Cardinal Frings received Ratzinger's letter, he found the contents helpful and he simply added the date, the proper salutation to the cardinal secretary of state, and his signature and sent the letter on to the Vatican. The letter judged that only two of the seven schemas were fit for conciliar deliberation, namely, the schema on the liturgy and another on ecumenical openings to the Orthodox churches.

A conciliar star was born. Interestingly, Ratzinger faulted the *de Fontibus* schema, arguing it had "to be revised so as to avoid speaking authoritatively on issues of dispute among Catholic theologians in good standing." One wishes he had brought forth that concern during the drafting of *Veritatis Splendor*! More generally, Ratzinger argued the documents should not speak in the neo-Scholastic style of the Roman curia, but should "instead speak the language of Holy Scripture and the holy fathers of the Church." And the texts should be written so that they "attract separated Christians and will give fresh witness to Jesus Christ in a world in which many people find Christian faith an alien reality." Soon Ratzinger and Karl Rahner were collaborating on an alternate schema on revelation.

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Let me jump ahead. At the end of the book, Wicks sums up the significance of Vatican II, and specifically of *Dei Verbum*, and points the church in a direction that might help overcome some of the post-conciliar divisions that have emerged, though not all. He writes:

> Many interpreters of Vatican II feature the outward movements urged by the council to move Catholics towards *rapprochement* with others in

> ecumenical efforts, interreligious dialogue, and respectful exchanges over salient features of the contemporary world's culture, economics, politics, and struggle for world peace. But the concluding passages of *Dei Verbum* point Catholics toward another movement, that is, inward and downward toward personal *ressourcement* as one cultivates spiritual self-care by daily nourishment of heart and soul, along with direction and guidance, from *lectio divina* of scripture. This is a movement going deeply into one's life of faith, where God addresses Christian believers in words of personal grace and rescue, while imparting the very gifts that that empower rejuvenated disciples for their reconciling service of God in the world.

This is a beautiful, and balancing, vision. I think the note that is missing here, and which is equally characteristic of the vision of Vatican II, is the communal element, the sense, rooted in Scripture, that we belong to a people, the people of God, the church. This is seen not only in the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium* for example, but also in the fact that in the decree on the priesthood, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the word "priest" in the singular was consciously never used. The document speaks of the renewal of the presbyterate. This is no mere quibble. At least in the U.S. there has developed a very non-Catholic spirituality of the "me and Jesus" variety that I find at odds with the tradition of the church. But Wicks is undoubtedly correct that *Dei Verbum* calls all Christians to spiritual renewal by prayerful reading of the Bible.

This was also quite new, or so it seemed at the time. In the years before Vatican II, and indeed in the draft *de Fontibus*, the tone was one of admonition and danger about lay Catholics reading Scripture. Here, we rub up against the key, and contested, issue of hermeneutics. Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2005 address to the curia, insisted that it was wrong to interpret Vatican II through a hermeneutic of rupture. Instead, he commended a hermeneutic of reform, which includes elements of both continuity and discontinuity. Some of our conservative friends mistakenly say the pope called for a hermeneutic of continuity but he did no such thing. Wicks' connects this larger issue of hermeneutics to the specific point about the differing approach to revelation in the pre-conciliar draft and the final text:

> A first impression of such changes in content and tone might lead one to see Vatican II as breaking with or even rejecting previous church tradition and teaching. But such a conclusion takes no account of how *De Fontibus* was prepared in isolation from, and even suspicious opposition to,

> important developments in Catholic theology in the years before Vatican II. *Dei Verbum* was clearly discontinuous with *De Fontibus*, prepared three years earlier, but the constitution of 1965 shows notable continuities with central and strong movements of biblical, theological and pastoral renewal among Catholics before Vatican II. There was rupture, but on the small scale of contrast between the council's official preparation and the directions taken [by the council fathers] from late 1962 onwards.

I will note in passing one other instance Wicks cites in which the council created a kind of "rupture" with what went immediately before, but did so by reaching back further in the tradition to find the correctives to the 19th-century hostility to modernity that so distorted Catholic theology and which found its fullest expression in Pope Pius IX's "Syllabus of Errors." Cardinal Augustine Bea's work leading the newly created Secretariat for Christian Unity shaped all the conciliar documents, but especially three eventual key texts: the decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*; the decree on non-Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate*; and the decree on religious liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*. Fr. Ratzinger at the time noted the discontinuity here, calling the three documents "a kind of counter-syllabus."

This ecumenical turn receives a large and thoughtful treatment in the book, the way Pope John XXIII's consideration for ecumenical affairs shaped the council and the central role of Bea, longtime rector of the Biblical Institute. Indeed, this ecumenical turn is one of the key filters through which Vatican II should be understood according to Wicks.

There is so much else in this book that I have not even touched on, and I have scarcely done justice to the issues I did consider. But I hope I have imparted enough of a sense of Wicks' book to encourage readers to buy it and read it. It was not so long ago that people thought Vatican II had been received and its only authoritative interpretation was complete. This scholarly work shows the degree to which we are all of us still receiving the council and points to the singular fact that the only medicine for the divisions within the church today must be found in continued attention to the documents and history of the Second Vatican Council.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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