

The hermeneutic of dysfunction

NCR Editorial Staff | Mar. 5, 2010



Bishops of the world line the main aisle of St. Peter's Basilica during the opening session of the Second Vatican Council in 1962. (CNS file photo)

It doesn't take an expert church observer to understand that those who want to diminish the effect of the Second Vatican Council have come upon an easy sound-bite solution: Put Catholics in one of two 'hermeneutics' boxes. Under that scheme, Catholics embody either the hermeneutic of discontinuity, applied to those who believe significant change occurred at the council, or the hermeneutic of continuity, those who hold that the council was merely an affirmation of what went before, but dressed up for the 20th century.

It's a 'you're for us or against us' strategy of dealing with the complexities and messiness of church reform. While a quick way to tidy the boundaries and square the edges, the strategy does a disservice to serious consideration of the council and it masks deeper problems within the community.

There's simply been too much reform, too much theology advanced, too much demographic change, too much practice that's worlds different from 45 years ago to suddenly claim that little has actually changed.

Yet this is precisely what some bishops are attempting to do by setting up unrealistically rigid divisions as a way to simplify the discussion, and in the process, reassert their authority. It is a convenient tactic for bishops who find themselves overseeing a troubled church from an episcopal vantage point from which credibility and authority have been steadily draining in recent decades.

Gaining control over the liturgy and attempting to send the faithful on a forced march back to some ill-defined simpler and purer period of the past is for some a way to combat the twin ills of modernity and secularization, which they blame for much of Catholicism's contemporary troubles.

While bishops' suspicions of the wider culture certainly carry weight, placing all the blame on outside forces misses what many priests and laypeople assess as a more pressing matter inside the Catholic community. One might label it the hermeneutic of dysfunction, an analysis that would center on a leadership layer in the Catholic church that keeps unraveling but refuses to see itself as any part of the problem. The sex abuse crisis, now spreading through Ireland and Germany, is the most obvious symptom of the deeper problems of the hierarchical culture. It is a culture in desperate need of introspection and renewal.

It is unlikely that Pope Benedict XVI, in using competing hermeneutics as a way to explain what he saw as a problem in implementing the council, intended to reduce the entire council experience and its aftermath into two all-inclusive and opposed choices.

Dividing Catholics into competing camps and trying to short-circuit the reforms of Vatican II deflect attention from the troubles of the hierarchical culture. But the deeper problems of accountability and transparency won't disappear.

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