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The Hermeneutic of Reform & the American Hierarchy

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Distinctly Catholic

Pope Benedict XVI employed the phrase "hermeneutic of reform" in his famous 2005 address to the curia, in which he faulted some of the early histories of the Second Vatican Council. Those histories tended to focus almost exclusively on the discontinuities brought on by the Council and Benedict reminded his listeners that a true hermeneutic of reform entails elements of both continuity and discontinuity.

Of course, Rome may like its plots and sense of high drama — it is hard not to when you walk through streets about which Chateaubriand said, "even the dust that crumbles beneath your feet speaks to you something of human grandeur" — but we need not attribute an ideological bias to those early historians of the Council Benedict was criticizing. In the wake of change, it is what is new, the discontinuities, that seems most obvious, certainly most newsworthy. Vatican II happened in real media time, the first Council to do so really (although there was press coverage of Vatican I), with Xavier Rynne penning columns in *The New Yorker* about the proceedings, so the early history had the further bias towards focusing on discontinuity because journalism is only concerned with what is new.

Yesterday, while writing about the return of *Crisis* magazine, I noted my belief that there was something not quite right about the claim that in 1982, when the magazine was first begun, the Church was a mess, and now it is less so because of the muscular Christianity of John Paul II, Benedict XVI and the bishops they have appointed. There is, it seems evident to me and evident today, much more continuity between Paul VI and John Paul II than is popularly believed, especially in their shared openness to *Communio* theology. But, I can see how it was the differences that seemed most apparent in 1982. Paul VI was shy and withdrawn, prone to introspection and self-doubt. John Paul II was vigorous, an extrovert, and he oozed self-confidence. Stylistically, they could not have been more different. Still, looking back now, when personalities have faded and the substance of their papacies comes into view, it is the continuity that

begins to emerge.

The same could be said about the American hierarchy. I remember an American bishop being told many years ago not to use the phrase "seamless garment" when addressing a pro-life group. That phrase was not heretical. It was not a bad metaphor. But, that phrase had been crafted by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and it spoke to his desire to maintain a broad moral compass when assessing public policy and, not unimportantly, to avoid having bishops appearing too partisan. The bishop told not to use the phrase was not a member of the "Bernardin camp" but was more or less a member of the group of bishops that thought abortion really should be the decisive issue, worried that the "seamless garment" approach was insufficiently clear, and had no worries about appearing partisan. Now, was there any disagreement about abortion? No. Cardinal Bernardin was as pro-life as any other American bishop. And, lest we forget, Cardinals Law and O'Connor were deeply committed to the Church's social teachings: Law got his start as a civil rights priest and O'Connor was second-to-none in his support for organized labor. Was there any disagreement about emphasis? Yes. At the time, the different emphasis stood out. Now, thirty years on, it is difficult to perceive that difference as a "crisis."

In addition to a different emphasis, of course, it is natural for there to be a certain amount of rivalry among bishops. Cardinal Francis Spellman was enormously influential given his close ties with Pope Pius XII, but the Midwestern bishops erected what they called the "Hindenburg Line" to limit the geographic reach of Spellman's influence, especially when it came to the appointment of new bishops. Spellman was able to place his aide Patrick O'Boyle in Washington and his auxiliary, John O'Hara, C.S.C. first in Buffalo and then in Philadelphia, but beyond the Hindenburg Line, he struck out. Only once, in 1948, did Spellman succeed in crossing the line, when another auxiliary, James McIntyre, was appointed Archbishop of Los Angeles.

There were genuine points of disagreement between Spellman and the great Midwestern bishops like McNicholas, Mooney, Stritch, and Meyer. Spellman looked to Rome for his influence, while the Midwesterners were more heavily involved in the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Midwestern bishops were more entrenched in the Church's social justice teachings, while Spellman famously sent the seminarians out to dig graves when the gravediggers union struck. But, mostly, the Midwesterners wanted to promote their friends and their vision and Spellman wanted to further his ideas and advance his friends. They did not disagree on doctrine and, ironically perhaps, it was Spellman who made the consequential decision to bring John Courtney Murray, S.J., to Vatican II as his peritus. At the Council, all the American bishops pushed hard for the Decree on Religious Liberty and joined the majority of reforming bishops on almost all issues.

The Apostles Peter and Paul had their disagreements, but they were both of them absolutely convinced that the Crucified lives. Spellman and the Midwesterners were often at odds on this issue or that, but they were united in their shared commitment to the central teachings of the faith. Cardinals Bernardin, Law and O'Connor had more in common than not. In the hurly-burly of history as it is lived, commentators naturally focus on the differences, but with the value of hindsight, it is the commonality that emerges. The early 1980s may have seemed like a time of crisis to some. Others wax hyperbolic about divisions within the hierarchy today. But, in the long history of the Church, it is not the divisions and the discontinuities that are striking but the centuries' long commitment to the Creed.

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