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Major Vatican assault coming in October, says former Maryknoll provincial

by Robert McClory

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In the article below, former Maryknoll superior general Fr. Jon Sivalon charges that the action against LCWR and other recent Vatican actions "should be seen as 'initial forays of shock and awe' to soften the strongest areas of resistance" before a major onslaught begins. "That major assault is scheduled for October of 2012," he says, "with the opening of the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith." The target, Sivalon says, is modern culture, which Pope Benedict is determined to discredit through "a hermeneutic of retrenchment." The article originally appeared on the homepage of the organization, I Stand With the Sisters.

Vatican Declares "Year of Assault"

By John C. Sivalon, M.M.

Under the guise of a "Year of Faith," the Vatican has launched an all-out assault on any theology or interpretation of Vatican II based on what it calls a "Hermeneutic (Interpretation) of Rupture." This theological assault is articulated in the document known as "Porta Fidei" written by Benedict XVI and further specified in a document titled "Note on Recommendations for the Implementation of the Year of Faith" which was developed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Both of these documents are cited by Cardinal Levada in his statement on the doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). The rationale for that assessment and other punitive moves that have been made in recent months (Caritas International, educational institutes, and the Girl Scouts) must be understood in the broader context of this special "year of assault."

The real crux of the issue according to the "Note" is a "correct understanding" of Vatican II over against

"erroneous interpretations." Benedict likes to refer to these interpretations as being based on a "hermeneutic of discontinuity" while referring to his own interpretation as being based on a "hermeneutic of renewal." In truth, better labels for these respectively, are a "hermeneutic of mission" over against Benedict's "hermeneutic of retrenchment."

The hermeneutic of mission sees in the documents of Vatican II an attempt by the Church to rediscover in its past the kernels of fresh understandings and ecclesial structures that respond more authentically and relevantly to what the Council called the modern world. This hermeneutic sees the Council Fathers confirming tradition as a foundation upon which faith can continually build and grow as its context changes. It also sees God as continually present in history and culture, graciously offering new perceptions for understanding and interpreting the fullness of revelation.

The hermeneutic of retrenchment, on the other hand, sees in the documents of Vatican II the restatement of ossified doctrines in language that can be understood by the modern world. The hermeneutic of retrenchment regards tradition as a wall which functions to deter erroneous understandings. It also tends to see the modern context of the world negatively, often assigning to it labels such as secularism, relativism or pluralism. As Benedict says, "whereas in the past it was possible to recognize a unitary cultural matrix, broadly accepted in its appeal to the content of the faith and the values inspired by it, today this no longer seems to be the case in large swathes of society, ..." The hermeneutic of retrenchment, hence, longs for the past; for an idealized age of Christendom.

Thus, the action against LCWR and the other actions against loyal voices of faithful Christians open to discerning God's wisdom in modern culture, should be seen as initial forays of shock and awe to soften the strongest areas of resistance, before the actual onslaught begins. That major assault is scheduled for October of 2012, with the opening of the Synod of Bishops on the "New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith." The first working paper (Lineamenta) for this synod clearly sets forth the target of "New Evangelization."

The target is plainly modern culture. According to the document the modern world is epitomized by a culture of relativism, which it says has even seeped into Christian life and ecclesial communities. The authors claim that its serious "anthropological implications are a questioning of basic human experiences for example the relation between a man and a woman as well as the meaning of reproduction and death itself." Associated with this phenomenon, the document states, is the tremendous mixing of cultures resulting in "forms of corruption, the erosion of the fundamental references to life, the undermining of the values for which we exert ourselves and the deterioration of the very human ties we use to identify ourselves and give meaning to our lives." Benedict in other places has labeled this pluralism; thus completing his trilogy of the demonic: secularism, relativism and pluralism, as he dreams of a reestablished, romanticized culture of Medieval Europe.

In stark contrast, the institutes of women religious dramatically exemplify the hermeneutic of mission: they moved out of "habits" that set them apart from the world; face the challenges of embracing the presence of God in modern culture; and faithfully struggle with being an authentic and clear sign of God's love for the world. The assessment against them is outrageous for its patronizing arrogance and its patriarchy. But it is also clear that it is about much more: the dramatic fissure within the Roman Catholic church concerning the interpretation of Vatican II and the embracing (or failure to embrace) God's presence in modern culture.

In this assault what is so pernicious, besides the effects on the lives of those immediately and dramatically targeted, is the appropriation of concepts developed by those operating out of a hermeneutic of mission by those who uphold a hermeneutic of retrenchment, who then redefine and use those concepts to defend and

support their assault. Three quick examples of this are found in the Statement of Cardinal Levada on the doctrinal assessment of the LCWR and in the doctrinal assessment itself.

First, Levada claims that the overarching aim of the Assessment is to assist in implementing an "ecclesiology of communion." The theologians who developed this ecclesiology based their reflections on the Vatican II emphasis on Church as the People of God, Body of Christ or A Pilgrim People. All of these images were employed by Vatican II to broaden the understanding of Church as being more than the hierarchy. None of these paradigms envision unity as fabricated through force or obedience to doctrine. Rather, unity is seen as flowing out of dialogue and common discernment as the People of God struggle together to be faithful and authentic witnesses of self-emptying Love. Who more than these institutes of religious women epitomize communion founded on faith and lived as self-emptying love?

Second, the doctrinal assessment of LCWR defines the sacramental character of the Church almost exclusively as patriarchal hierarchy. Again, the assessment document usurps a Vatican II understanding of Church as sacrament and recasts it. Vatican II on the other hand posits the Church in its entirety as the sacrament of the Reign of God.

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Finally, in the post-Vatican II period, many theologians from various parts of the world have developed the image of Church as Prophet. They established this vision on a preferential option for the poor, a belief in salvation as liberation and the need to be critical not just of structures of the world but of the Church itself and its role in support of situations of oppression and human denigration. However the assessment document denies any possibility of prophecy aimed at the Church hierarchy itself or separate from that hierarchy. This abhorrent disregard for the Biblical prophets and their strong stance against the priest, kings and empty rituals of faith somehow is not perceived as a rupture with the past or tradition by those operating out of this hermeneutic of retrenchment.

As modern Catholics celebrate the 50th anniversary of the opening of Vatican II, we have entered into a new chapter of church history. The Council that was declared to open the windows is now being reinterpreted as closed shutters, protecting the Church from the gale force winds of a world searching for spiritual authenticity. While said to be a time of renewal, the "Year of Faith" is really dedicated to the idolatry of doctrine, power and hierarchy. The sisters in their communal service to the Church and world, who not only take a vow of poverty but actually live that vow without privilege, status or accumulation of wealth are a vivid and prophetic contrast to the inauthenticity of the call to retrenchment masquerading as renewal.

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