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Bishop lived teachings of 'Lumen Gentium' for 37 years

by William McDonough



Last year marked a 10th anniversary that many of us Minnesota Catholics observed. On Sept. 19, 2001, Bishop Raymond Lucker died in Our Lady of Good Counsel Cancer Home in St. Paul.

The year 2001 had been a fast-moving journey for Lucker. Having retired at the turn of the new year after serving 25 years as bishop of the rural diocese of New Ulm, Lucker planned to write a book on what he called the "beauty and challenge of divine revelation." But quickly he suffered a recurrence of the malignant melanoma that was first diagnosed in 1999. By summer 2001 he was living in the hospice, though still thinking about his book.

Since I had filled in for him at a teaching engagement at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul when he first became sick, he invited me to twice-weekly conversations all summer -- conversations that ultimately shaped the book worked on by 15 Minnesota Catholic theologians and with an introduction comprised of Lucker's taped words of that summer, brought together and edited. The book was titled *Revelation and the Church: Vatican II in the Twenty-First Century*, published by Orbis in 2003.

Recently I had the cassette tape recordings of those conversations transferred to CD, and listened again some 10 years later. I remembered it vaguely from 2001, but was struck in rehearing the tapes how Lucker came back again and again to *Lumen Gentium*, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. The document had been promulgated just as Lucker arrived for graduate studies in Rome in the fall of 1964. He then lived with and in its teachings for the last 37 years of his life -- exactly half his life span of 74 years.

In our conversations, Lucker often cited paragraph 12 of *Lumen Gentium*, which begins by claiming: "The holy people of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office: it spread abroad a living witness to him, especially by a life of faith and love and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips confessing his name. The whole body of the faithful who have received an anointing which comes from the holy one cannot be mistaken in belief."

Lucker liked the way the paragraph's conclusion turned back to the same theme, ending with these words: "Those who have charge over the church should judge the genuineness and orderly use of these gifts [among the faithful of every rank], and it is especially their office not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to what is good."

Reflecting on that perspective, I heard anew a conversation we'd had at the cancer home. One or another line from this conversation made it into the book but, for whatever reasons, the conversation as a whole is not recorded there.

In light of hearing again Lucker's reverence for *Lumen Gentium*, I thought his words of 11 years ago bear reporting. So here is a transcription of the July 21, 2001, words of Lucker:

The article in the current issue of *The Tablet* is wonderful, just marvelous. [Lucker is referring to "Opening up the big questions" by Clifford Longley in the July 11, 2001, issue.] It is a good summary of the debate between Cardinals [Joseph] Ratzinger and [Walter] Kasper on the relationship of the local and universal churches.

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This really was one of the central doctrinal issues of the council. Ratzinger came out a while ago with his essay on *communio*, claiming that the universal church is first and then the local churches come from it.

Now that is worth revisiting. I was on a panel of the Catholic Theological Society of America and the speakers pointed out that Ratzinger's position is a remaking of the council, showing exact quotes from conciliar documents about the relationship of the universal church and the local churches.

Anyway, this whole conversation about the Curia is right in front of us; something is taking place. Oh my, as cardinals and bishops and archbishops are saying that we have got to come together and we have to talk to each other. When we are talking about these very issues, some of which they

claim are definitive and so can't be discussed. But saying these things can't be discussed is why we are so bogged down.

I finally was able to write down my position on one of these sheets, my position on the ordination of women. People have quoted me as being in favor of the ordination of women. That is how, for example, the *National Catholic Reporter* put it recently. [See "**Lucker's final certainty: God is here**" by Tom Roberts in *NCR*, May 25, 2001.] They said I am in favor of the ordination of women.

But that's not very nuanced. My true position is that I am in favor of free and open discussion. That means free and open discussion inviting theologians of all schools to participate, and allowing the emergence of all different cultural perspectives, letting them participate in the dialogue, including Hispanics and others, liberation theology. All theological schools.

So I am in favor of free and open discussion. I am in favor, therefore, of allowing, truly allowing, the bishops to say where they are at, to really say bishops are free to discuss, in synods, in international meetings, in councils, in reports of councils, or whatever. But we are free to have open discussion. This could take five years; it could take 200 years. I don't know and don't care. I'm not concerned about the time. It might take a long, long time.

And then during that time, as the discussion begins, I would come down on the side of arguing in favor of the ordination of women and then I would see what happens. I'd say: "Now let's see what prayer, discernment, meditation, preaching [bring], all the things the council documents say that we need to do." And listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church. Maybe after so many years we would be able definitively to say: "It seems to us and the Holy Spirit that so and so." And then I'm with the church. If the church says, "We have had this discussion now. We have come to some discernment; we've come to some consensus. The consensus is that Jesus did not will the ordination of women." So be it. I believe.

If the discernment process led us to say that the church is called to the ordination of women, then I say, "I believe, so be it." That would not be a belief in an authoritative teaching, but in a definitive teaching. This is what is being claimed now.

So, that is my position, which is quite different from simply saying: "Well, he is in favor of the ordination of women." I am in favor of talking about the ordination of women. I'm in favor of talking in favor of it without getting clobbered. So that is different.

Hey, listen, I'm getting tired.

The tape ends here. Lucker's written-out position on women's ordination does appear in our book. But, again, this conversation does not appear there.

It is worth hearing now, 11 years later, perhaps as a delayed communication from the local church here to the wider church. May Lucker be at rest in God, and may we continue the conversation about how to be the church, testing all things and holding fast to what is good.

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