

Prelates hope reform of the reform will fix flirtation with secularity

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Oct. 31, 2012 | Bulletins from the Human Side

The party line for the great synod of 2012, the one Pope Benedict XVI convened to initiate the year of evangelization, repeats a favorite theme of what is known as his reform of the reform.

The problem is, as the good pope has emphasized ever since and as former London *Tablet* editor Robert Wilkin has pointed out, he identified the adjustment period following the final session of Vatican II in 1965 with the student uprisings that swept across Europe in the spring of 1968.

He then began his shift from being a progressive theologian who supported Vatican II and its opening the church to the suffering world to a critic of the council whose main thesis became what it remains today: The documents of Vatican II need a new reading, a hermeneutic interpretation of continuity with the past rather than what he calls the hermeneutic of rupture that severed the connection with previous councils and, in its principal document, "The Church and the Modern World," entered into a dangerous relationship with the world and its so-called "modernism" -- the catch-all phrase used by popes Leo XIII and Pius X to condemn the new thinking that had supported such "dangerous novelties" as freedom of conscience.

Pope Benedict XVI wants, in effect, to turn the church away from that world and what he has repeatedly identified as its dangerous "secularism." The reform of the reform wants to lead Catholics back into a glorious isolation from the world's incessant mischief to the imagined golden age when it lived largely within itself as a "perfect society" in whose hierarchical gated community everyone knew and kept his or her place.

Some years ago in the study of American bishops done at Loyola University of Chicago, it was found that at the end of the day, the most important thing for a bishop is to know that the Holy Father would approve of what he had done from sun up to sundown.

Nobody can be surprised, then, to find so many cardinals and bishops paraphrasing, if not repeating word for word, this justifying theme for Benedict's reform of the reform.

No prelate has echoed the pope more faithfully than Cardinal Raymond Burke, now head of the Apostolic Signatura, who [CatholicCulture.org reports](http://CatholicCulture.org/reports) [1] sent a written intervention to the synod in which he criticizes "the antinomianism embedded in civil society" that has "infected post-Council ecclesial life."

"Excitement following the Council linked to the establishment of a new Church which teaches freedom and love, has strongly encouraged an attitude of indifference towards Church discipline, if not even hostility," he wrote. Yes, you certainly must stamp out any church that teaches freedom and love. This was not the vision Pope John XXIII brought to the council that he convened, as he once said, "to make the human sojourn on earth less sad," perhaps the most Catholic words uttered by any pope in the 20th century.

Cardinal William Levada, late of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, repeated this papal theme at a celebration of the 50th anniversary of Vatican II held at the The Catholic University of America. He criticized the "hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture" that he claims "availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media

and also one trend of modern theology." Benedict's reform through the year of evangelization will fix this dangerous flirtation with secularity.

We are not surprised to learn that, at a talk at St. Mary's Seminary in Brownsville, Texas, Bishop Patrick Flores says that the Church is threatened by "a neo-secular hegemony reminiscent of the Roman Empire," asserting that the Church, living outside of the "closed orb of the world" may be considered subversive to the "Caesar," who "in whatever form ? is jealous to project the whole person and the whole of society."

Cardinal Francis George of Chicago seems to have drunk the Kool-Aid, too, and is selling tickets to the catacombs for Christians who are under threat of persecution, according to the Chicago archbishop, by the "anti-religious sentiments (that) have emerged during this year's political campaigns." Yes, he confirms, he did say "that I expected to die in bed, my successor will die in prison, and his successor will die a martyr in the public square." All this, of course, he attributes -- Pope Benedict, do you hear me? -- to the "problems created by aggressive anti-religious secularism."

But *secular* is also the term given to diocesan priests, and it comes from the Latin *saeculum*, which means "age" or "of an age." Priests are ordained not to flee from but to serve the age in which they live. The *saeculum*, the times in which it lives, were on Pope John XXIII's mind when he urged the council fathers not to look away from, but rather "to read the signs of the times." The council's work was to open the church to the age in which it lived but from which it had divorced itself, claiming custody of the children.

Pope John XXIII had lived and worked in the far reaches of the world during his years as a papal diplomat. He understood, as he told the council fathers in his opening address half a century ago, that the church should put aside harsh judgment and use the "medicine of mercy" in dealing with the world. He did not see the world as rising up to persecute the church but, like the injured man by the road on the way to Jericho, in need of its healing ministry.

Who sounds more Catholic: Pope Benedict XVI and the cardinals and bishops eager to second his motion about the dangerous world, or G. K. Chesterton, who wrote of those who say that "it is a bad universe but will certainly get better. I say that it is certainly a good universe, even if it worse."

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