

CREATIVE FIDELITY IN A TIME OF TRANSITION

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AN ARTICLE with this title was published in the *Australasian Catholic Record* in 2002. It is hoped that this summary of the work of thinkers who are seeking the way forward for Catholicism will make their contributions available to a wider audience. More detailed references to the works referred to can be found in the text of the original article.

The Second Vatican Council initiated a time of transition, in which the Church seeks a renewal in its fidelity to the Gospel. In recent centuries the Church had adopted a reactionary attitude towards the broader world; the Council called it to enter into a life-giving relationship with this broader world. The two main leaders initially involved, Pope John Paul II (whose massive biography (*Apostle of Hope*) was published by George Weigel), and the Pope's principal aide Cardinal Ratzinger (discussed in a thoughtful study by John Allen) had different views concerning the form of relationship that was called for towards the modern world and its culture.

For Cardinal Ratzinger (a follower of Augustine in the Platonic tradition) this relationship should be one of challenge and evangelization; he saw a collaborative dialogue with the contemporary world as a danger to the Church's integrity. The Pope, who had made a significant contribution to the teaching of the Council, proposing the principles that could make a creative dialogue possible, was not given strong support by his principal collaborator. John Allen points out the radically different principles behind the outlooks of these two leaders: Ratzinger's understanding of the human situation saw it as a confrontation between

fallen human nature and the saving Grace the Church must offer to world; the Pope's view of the human situation affirmed the presence of another factor, between Fallen Nature and Grace: human nature itself as God's creation—and it is this factor, at work in human cultures that provides the possibility of the fruitful dialogue the Church must enter into with the culture of modernity.

Appealing to Christopher Dawson's understanding of human culture, as radically deficient and destined to disintegrate if it lacks a relation to the transcendent, Matthew Lamb (in articles published in *Communio*) took up the Pope's point of view, and further developed it, making use of Bernard Lonergan's understanding of the differentiation of consciousness

Other thinkers have made important contributions to the question, clarifying the problems the Church must come to terms with if it is to enter into an authentic dialogue with contemporary cultures. Gerhard Lohfink, one of Germany's leading scripture scholars is convinced that such a dialogue will only be fruitful if the Church leaves behind its over-institutionalized life as a mass movement and recovers the benefits of contemplative communion, through which it can enter into conversations with genuine seekers after truth. The Salvation History which has engendered the Judeo-Christian faith, he points out, makes it clear that God's patient offer to struggling humanity has been made through the concrete experience of an elected people, in concrete places and times. If we do not recognize this principle of Salvation History, Lohfink is convinced, there will be no effective renewal

of the Church. What united the first Christian communities that gave us the New Testament was not the search for doctrinal unity but the conviction that they were called to make God's saving plan visible in the world.

Reviewing the cultural developments that have shaped the Church's life, the French systematic theologian, Ghislain Lafont makes proposals concerning a genuine dialogue with the contemporary world that have much in common with what Lohfink has proposed. Lafont judges the problems of the Church in its relationship with the contemporary world as having their origin at the end of the first millennium, with the emergence of a dawning recognition that human and cultural developments must be recognized as having their own autonomy: something that has been clearly affirmed by Vatican II. The prevailing Platonic outlook, however, that all enlightenment came from God made it difficult for churchmen to recognize the challenge brought by this development. They faced the choice of either recognizing this autonomy, or opposing this new claim and becoming 'anti-modern'. In fact, the Church's future was shaped by this latter course, initiating an alienation that was unfortunate for both the Church and the broader world.

Lafont thinks that an internal development in Catholic culture, which he calls the 'Gregorian form' (since it originated in reforms associated with Pope Gregory VII), reforms that stressed doctrinal unity, hierarchical authority, and a celibate priesthood. Lafont suggests this 'Gregorian Form' has shaped the life of the Church until the pontificate of Pius XII on the eve of Vatican II. As a consequence, Lafont concludes, the Church has confronted the world with a 'worrisome face', whereas, showing its true self it would present a beautiful and desirable face.

Both Lohfink and Lafont point to the excessive institutionalization of the Church as contributing to the Church's difficulties. Excessive institutionalization causes a depersonalization of those who participate in



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any social system. The identity of the human person involves a sense of destiny. Salvation History has taught us that this destiny transcends secular reality.

The progressive institutionalization of the Church's life: clarifying the juridical implications of the Church's hierarchical constitution, and painstakingly refining the terms in which the church's doctrines can be expressed, have not brought renewed life to the Church. Instead, as the great sociologist, Max Weber, has observed, there has been a growing sense of 'disenchantment' with the claims of Christian faith.

Karl Rahner carries forward the thought of thinkers like Lohfink and Lafont. He thinks that the Church will only find the renewal it needs in order to enter into a creative dialogue with the cultures of the world if it learns to live in the presence of the DIVINE MYSTERY itself. Church leaders must share with the faithful the 'mystagogy' necessary if the Church's communion gives expression to its relationship with this mystery.

It is a mystery that is met with in the LIVING PRESENCE OF OUR SAVING LORD in the Salvation History recorded in the sacred writings of the two Testaments.

It is the mystery HIDDEN FROM ALL AGES AND NOW REVEALED IN THE INCARNATE WORD, CHRIST AMONG US OUR HOPE OF GLORY.

It is the mystery forever alive, the communion we share, through the prophetic blessings that are A GIFT OF THE SPIRIT OF GOD.