

Vatican II Was First-Class Cardinal Levada Corrects Some Misunderstandings

by Charlotte Hays

WASHINGTON — Critics have accused the Second Vatican Council of many things, but Cardinal William Levada says one criticism in particular lacks any credibility — the claim that Vatican II was in any way a "second-class council" whose teachings, therefore, aren't binding on Catholics. Cardinal Levada, who stepped down in June as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, refuted this notion in his Sept. 26 opening address at a four-day symposium held at The Catholic University of America entitled "Reform and Renewal: Vatican II After 50 Years."

The claim, made by followers of the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, is based on the idea it was "merely" a pastoral council that didn't define dogma. "It is true to say that Vatican II was by intention a 'pastoral' council," Cardinal Levada told his CUA audience, "[because] it was decided a priori that its broad scope of ecumenical dialogue (with other Christians) and interreligious dialogue (with other religions) and with the society of the 'world' did not call for the formulation of new dogmas to correct errors of faith, as was the case in previous councils." But this did not make it any less authoritative than the rest of the 21 ecumenical councils that have occurred during the Catholic Church's 2,000 year history, the American cardinal stressed. "One cannot infer that the Council's teachings are not 'doctrinal,'" he said.

"Teaching the gospel of life and salvation is the chief 'pastoral' task of bishops; it is doctrinal in its principles and pastoral in its applications. So, too, the teaching of the 'universal ordinary magisterium' — the apostolic College of Bishops, together with their head, the Pope — should not be considered 'second-class teaching' or 'optional' and not necessary to accept." The cardinal said that, according to the best theological interpretations, the Second Vatican Council was intended to "resolve and declare the Catholic faith on several issues that had been disputed in the past." Said Cardinal Levada, "Rather than pastoral or doctrinal, we should say of the Council that it was pastoral and doctrinal."

The Collegial Council

For example, while the Council affirmed the teaching of papal infallibility defined at the First Vatican Council, it also clarified the role of the College of Bishops as exercising the teaching authority of the Church. Cardinal Levada said the synods of bishops, which are held every three years at the Vatican, are a direct consequence of this development in the Church's understanding of collegial authority. In the post-conciliar period, these international episcopal gatherings have addressed the fundamental themes of the laity, the family, religious life, the formation of priests, the priesthood and bishops, he noted, along with key pastoral and doctrinal issues like catechesis, evangelization, penance and reconciliation, the Eucharist and the Bible. "Indeed, the 50th anniversary of the Council coincides with this year's synod, whose theme is 'The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith,'" the cardinal said, referring to the synod that began Oct. 7. "In these synods and apostolic exhortations, the Church has amassed a rich treasury giving sure direction for a correct interpretation of the Council itself."

Cardinal Levada also discussed the "letter vs. spirit" debate, which seeks to divide the interpretation of the Council's work into two opposing camps: one that is rigidly attached to the wording of the Council's texts and another that conforms to a substantially different "spirit" of radical reform that some Catholics have asserted to be the Council's true outlook. But Cardinal Levada insisted it was "not legitimate to separate the letter and spirit of the Council," pointing to Pope Benedict XVI's 2005 address to the Curia as a guide to interpret the Council properly. In that address, the Pope rejected the "hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture" that "caused confusion" by claiming the Council's texts failed to express its true "spirit" fully. The correct mode of interpreting the Council is through "the hermeneutic of reform," the Holy Father said, a method that he said promotes "renewal in continuity" of the Church

and that, unlike the noisy hermeneutic of discontinuity, "silently, but more and more visibly, bore and is bearing fruit."

Other Perspectives

Like Benedict and Cardinal Levada, CUA theology professor Christopher Ruddy rejects the notion that the Second Vatican Council is best understood when viewed through a "letter vs. spirit" lens. Speaking at a symposium discussion of *Lumen Gentium* (Light for the Nations), the Council's dogmatic constitution on the Church, Ruddy began with a trenchant but good-natured observation about how Catholics often debate about Vatican II. "I sometimes have the impression," Ruddy said, "that discussions and debates over the Council have for some time resembled a game of tic-tac-toe played by adults: Each player knows the other's moves, and the result is invariably deadlock." Instead of dialogue, the opposing camps often trade rhetorical phrases like "spirit of Vatican II" and "Show me the text," Ruddy added, "with the result of an often sterile hermeneutical stalemate."

At a Sept. 29 symposium session, Dominican Father Nicolas Lombardo, assistant professor at the School of Theology and Religious Studies at CUA, addressed one of the most controversial Council documents, *Dignitatis Humanae*, its decree on religious freedom. Some of the Council Fathers were opposed to a religious-liberty decree that would bestow equal rights on non-Catholic religions on the grounds that "error has no rights." But Father Lombardo said that the right to be immune from coercion and come to a religious belief of one's own free will — rights enshrined in *Dignitatis Humanae* — are in harmony with the dignity of the human person.

Asked if this right is particularly relevant in light of the federal Health and Human Services' contraceptive mandate, which seeks to define what institutions can be considered Catholic and therefore exempt from the federal mandate, Father Lombardo replied, "Yes — and the right to religious freedom is the right on which all other rights hang. We cannot afford to give an inch on this."

'Great Grace'

At the end of his overview of the Second Vatican Council and its consequences, including its role in inspiring publication of the 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church, Cardinal Levada alluded to its continuing influence as the Church embarks on the Year of Faith that began Oct. 11, the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Council.

Dear friends, as this symposium looks back to the 'great grace' that was the Second Vatican Council, may it also serve to help us look forward to the Year of Faith designed to honor the Council and the Catechism," he said. "As we become stronger by believing, who knows but that you and I will find ourselves in the vanguard of the New Evangelization, whose urgency for the Church today is the theme of [October's] Synod of Bishops' assembly at the Vatican. Concluded Cardinal Levada, "God bless you all, and God bless the ongoing 'reform and renewal' of our beloved Church."

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