

## Item #16 (The Hermeneutical Challenge of Vatican II)

This Item was originally Entry #7 in “James Swetnam’s Close Readings”.

*This is the text of §81. A recent re-reading of what I wrote almost thirty years ago has left me with the conviction that what I wrote then is as relevant today as it was then. For me secularism—the sundering of ties with the transcendent dimension of man’s life—is the principal challenge today to living a Christian life of faith in all its fullness. This applies to the study and living of the Bible as well as all other aspects of contemporary life. Hence I present below the text of what I wrote in 1980.*

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The publication of the official Latin text of Vatican Council II automatically launched a massive hermeneutical challenge to the church. The challenge had two clearly distinguishable parts: 1) What was the *meaning* of the text which the council fathers decreed and Paul VI promulgated? 2) What was the *significance* of this meaning for the Catholics of the world, individually and collectively?

Ideally, what should have happened as soon as the texts appeared can be expressed as follows: First, an intensive educational campaign to instruct Catholic priests and educators as to the meaning of the text puts the original Latin or an approved vernacular translation in the hands of qualified Catholics for reading, study and discussion against the background of Scripture and Catholic tradition. Once Catholic leaders understand what the council means, they in turn instruct the faithful about what the meaning is. Every one labors to know what is being said so that this can be accepted in a spirit of faith as the authoritative manifestation of God’s will for His church. Once the meaning of the text has been reasonably mastered, the more challenging task of seeing the *significance* of this meaning is undertaken in terms of the varying circumstances of individual Catholics and communities of Catholics throughout the world. Again, this is undertaken with a conscious awareness of the obligation to seek what God objectively wishes. The norm for any attempt to assess the significance of the council is the Spirit: Does a proposed course of action contribute to the building up of the Church (1 Cor. 14:5)? Does the proposed significance lead to an increase of charity, joy, peace, patience (Gal. 5:22)?

This is what should have been done.

What actually happened, of course (apart from possible questions of ill will which shall not be considered here), was quite different. There was relatively little systematic effort to make sure that Catholic priests and educators understood the meaning of the conciliar texts. The result is that the “average” Catholic has only the vaguest idea of what the meaning of Vatican II is. Most Catholics have not even read or heard the text. Thus, attempts to spell out the significance of that meaning in the various parts of the world have been doomed to isolation. Some successes there have certainly been, but these have been for the most part haphazard and relatively unplanned in relation to the church as a whole.

There has been much activity in the name of Vatican II since the close of the council, but most of this activity has been in the area of trying to come to grips with the

*significance* of the council without a prior study in sufficient depth of its *meaning*. The meaning has not been completely bypassed, of course, but relatively little effort has been made to situate Vatican II in the context of the entire sweep of church history. Even if such an attempt had been made on a large scale, the obstacles would have been formidable. In the past generation, the whole world of the temporal and the contingent (the “knowledge explosion”) has burst upon the Catholic consciousness with a force which Catholic thought has not yet been able adequately to absorb (witness the difficulties involved in coming to terms with literary genres in the study of Scripture, with temporally conditioned pronouncements in the study of dogma, with psychology and sociology and biology in the study of moral theology). Further, in many parts of the world, particularly in the United States and Europe, authority has come to occupy for many Catholics an “adversary” position so that within the church the magisterium has now become a nuisance instead of a guide, a hindrance instead of a help.

Most people cannot function without some sort of authority, and in many parts of the world today there has arisen a surrogate for the authority of the church. This surrogate is probably best labeled by the generic term “secularism” and consists of an amorphous, shifting amalgam of views, opinions and ideologies which have as a common central characteristic the exaltation of human independence at the expense of any transcendent norm. A principal source for this amalgam is modern science, and given the general excellence of modern science as science, much of the amalgam is true and good in its own sphere. The difficulty arises from the fact that this secular amalgam has assumed for many Catholics, either consciously or unconsciously, the role of supreme norm with regard to the sacred authority of Scripture and tradition as understood by the Catholic magisterium.

The normative role of the secular amalgam is greatly emphasized by the power of the mass media. The secular media naturally reported the council in a secular way, i.e., it prescind from any transcendent norm of authority. Willy-nilly, the secular media contributed to the force of the secular amalgam simply by functioning in a professional, “neutral” manner. It would have taken an extraordinary display of insight and courage for the Catholic media to take a proper distance from the secular media in their effort to present the council and its aftermath as it should have been presented.

A final major force in the distortion of the council can be found in the very causes which made the council necessary: the outdated and artificial relationships which often existed (and still occasionally exist) between Catholic institutions and the culture contemporary with them. For example, religious life immediately prior to the council was often marked by rigidity and excessive reliance on legal norms. The council was the occasion for an ill-considered reaction to this situation in the part of many religious, a reaction which went far beyond any thing the council called for, radical as this call was. The same phenomenon of overreaction can be seen in other areas, for example, ecumenism, freedom of conscience, the liturgy, education, the clerical state, the missions.

To realize just how formidable the hermeneutical challenge posed by Vatican II was, and *is*, it is sufficient to note in closing that many people would reject the distinction between meaning and significance, which is the basis for the present evaluation. For such persons, significance and meaning are indistinguishable. Vatican II has changed the meaning of all previous conciliar pronouncements because their significance in the context of Vatican II is now different.

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Note: For a detailed study of the hermeneutical distinction between meaning and significance, cf. E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven – London: Yale Univ. Press, 1967). (17 October 2008)

