The Council and the Catechism: Anniversaries to Mark with a “Year of Faith”

Keynote Address by Cardinal William Levada

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I am grateful for the invitation to offer the opening talk at this Symposium marking the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. It is not my task to try to do justice to every aspect of the teachings of the Council, since its major documents have been assigned to various distinguished speakers at this Symposium. In providing an overview of the Council and its vast program of reform and renewal, I would naturally want to include reference to the other two important events that share October 11, 2012, with the 50th anniversary of the Council: the 20th anniversary of the promulgation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and the opening of the “Year of Faith” proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI in his Apostolic Letter Porta Fidei published late last year.

In his article 10 years ago on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of Vatican II, Fr. Joseph Komonchak began with a little story that surely will have lost none of its punch today. “Noticing that the words ‘Vatican II’ evoked no response in her high school students, an Irish nun told [Komonchak] she had asked them what Vatican II was. After some time and with much hesitation, one of them asked: ‘Would that be the Pope’s summer residence?’”[1] Perhaps I will be forgiven, then, if I take a little time to provide some context for the subject of this Symposium, even with the disclaimer that I realize my audience is not a high school class.

I. Vatican II: the “great grace bestowed on the Church in the 20th century”

In the year 2000, when we passed from the second to the third millennium of Christianity, Pope John Paul II remarked that the documents of the Second Vatican Council “have lost nothing of their brilliance. They need to be read correctly, to be widely known and taken to heart as important and normative texts of the Magisterium, within the Church’s Tradition … I feel more than ever in duty bound to point to the Council as the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning.”[2] Pope Benedict XVI makes these words his own in his Apostolic Letter Porta Fidei (n.5) (“The Door of Faith”), with which he announced a year of faith to begin on the October 11 anniversary.

Developments in theology previous to the Council all made their contributions to its work: the liturgical movement, with its desire for more active participation of all the faithful; the biblical movement, calling for a renewed focus on the centrality of the word of God; the Patristic revival, sparking a ressourcement in theological and historical disciplines. In addition, it became the opportunity for the Catholic Church to embrace the new ecumenical movement, as a response to Jesus’s prayer “that all may be one” (Jn 17:11).
Pope John XXIII, who announced the convocation of this council on January 25, 1959, just a few months after he was elected Pope, described the purpose he envisioned for the council in his opening address on October 11, 1962: The Council was to “transmit doctrine, pure and whole, without attenuations or misrepresentations,” in such a way that “this sure and immutable teaching, which must be respected faithfully, is elaborated and presented in a way which corresponds to the needs of our time. … [For] the substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the manner of presenting it is another.” [3] Over 4 years, until the council’s conclusion on Dec. 8, 1965, the Bishops of the Catholic Church from throughout the world worked to fulfill the promise of Pope John’s words.

The Council’s sixteen documents were prepared through a process of long debates and voted on by the bishops individually by overwhelming majorities; but they are not of equal weight from a doctrinal point of view. The four “constitutions” are the major teaching documents: The Constitution on the sacred liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium) was the first of these major constitutions to be adopted on December 4, 1963, near the end of the Council’s second annual session. In this first major Council document, the bishops outlined the four major goals of the Council: “the sacred council has set out to impart an ever-increasing vigor to the Christian lives of the faithful; to adapt more closely to the needs of our age those institutions which are subject to change; to encourage whatever can promote the union of all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever serves to call all of humanity into the Church’s fold” (SC n. 1). The second of the constitutions was adopted almost a year later, on November 21, 1964: The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium). Third was the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum), adopted on November 18, 1965, less than a month before the close of the Council, and the fourth was the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes), adopted on December 7, 1965, the eve of the Council’s closing day. According the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, these four constitutions provide the interpretative key for the other decrees and declarations.[4]

To both Cardinal Suenens, then Archbishop of Malines-Brussels in Belgium, and Cardinal Montini, then Archbishop of Milan and elected Pope Paul VI in 1963, are attributed a working description that has helped concretize the vision of the Council Fathers into documents that – on the one hand, dealt with the “reform and renewal” of the Church in her inner nature (sometimes the phrase the Church “ad intra” is used), -- while on the other hand, they dealt with the Church related to the world (the Church “ad extra”). Using this criterion, one can see how the other decrees and declarations can also be viewed under this double arrangement: like the first three constitutions mentioned above, on the Word of God, the Church and her liturgy, concerns about the Church “ad intra” would be found developed in the Decrees on the Pastoral Life of Bishops, on the Ministry and Life of Priests, on the Formation of Priests, on the renewal of Religious Life, on the Church’s Missionary Activity, on the Eastern Churches and in the Declaration on Catholic Education. Its Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People marked the first time an ecumenical Council had addressed the role of the lay faithful. The Church “ad extra” was addressed in Gaudium et Spes, and also in the Declarations on Religious Liberty and on the relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions, as well as in the Decree on social communications. The Decree on Ecumenism necessarily dealt with “ad intra” questions (e.g., how do non-Christian Catholics pertain to the Catholic Church as the Mystical Body of Christ?), but it was also a part of the Council’s opening to the world “ad extra.” One cannot but agree
with the observations of so many commentators that the impact of the many invited ecumenical observers on the Council’s work should not be underestimated.

While theologians explore the history of the Council, the better to determine the meaning of its documents in the context of the whole Council, the Church’s magisterium, which has the final judgment on the correct interpretation of the Council, has also been active in the work of interpretation and application of the Council over the past 50 years. I call attention particularly to the Synod of Bishops, a new assembly recommended by the Council itself, and established immediately after the Council by Pope Paul VI. The Synod of Bishops is a good example of a concrete reform in Church structure that has recaptured the ancient practice of synodality and given it prominence at the highest level in the Church. The Synod’s ordinary assemblies have gathered representatives of the hierarchies of all the countries of the world every three years; there have also been numerous extraordinary and special assemblies of the Synod. The Apostolic Exhortations written by successive Popes have presented the conclusions of the Synods, which have interpreted and developed the Council’s documents, and applied them to new situations. These Synods, and the subsequent papal exhortations, have addressed the laity, the family, religious life, the formation of priests, the priesthood, and bishops. They have also treated important pastoral and doctrinal questions, such as 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.” In these Synods and Apostolic Exhortations, the Church has amassed a rich treasury giving sure direction for a correct interpretation of the Council itself.

In summary fashion I have tried to set the scene by describing what the Second Vatican Council was and did. Beyond this, in the hope that it will be useful for the work of this Symposium, I want to address the following questions: first, I want to look at the Council as an ecumenical council, the most recent in a line of twenty-one dating back to the fourth century. Second, I want to consider the distinction sometimes made about Vatican II being a “pastoral” council, and not a “doctrinal” one (that is, it did not define any new dogmas of the Church). Third, I want to speak about the “letter” and the “spirit” of the Council. Fourth, I want to examine the distinction between two ways of interpreting the Council - a hermeneutic of rupture and discontinuity and a hermeneutic of reform and renewal in continuity, particularly in the light of Pope Benedict’s 2005 address to the Roman Curia. Fifth, I want to highlight the relationship of the Catechism of the Catholic Church to the Council. Sixth and finally, I will focus on the Year of Faith announced by Pope Benedict XVI to guide the whole Church into a celebration of the Council’s golden jubilee.

II. The Ecumenical Councils and the “Deposit of Faith”

First of all I want to focus attention on Vatican II as a Council of Bishops, indeed an ecumenical council. Ever since the Council of Jerusalem (which is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles), the practice of bishops gathering together in local or regional councils has been a common instrument of Church governance. By the reckoning of the Catholic Church, Vatican II was the 21st of the councils, beginning with the Council of Nicea in 325, to merit the title of a general or ecumenical council, where the participating bishops come not from a single province or region, but from the universal Church. Seven such councils took place during the first
millennium of Christianity, before the schism with eastern Orthodoxy. Numerous such councils took place during the first half of the second millennium; only three of the 21 were called together during the past 500 years: the Council of Trent in the 16th century (called to meet the challenges stemming from the Protestant Reformation); the First Vatican Council in 1869-70; and the Second Vatican Council which met from 1962 to 1965.

This brief historical sketch will also remind us of one of the reasons for the convocation of the Vatican II: to complete the teaching of the First Vatican Council about the nature of the Church (“ad intra”), especially in regard to the Lord’s plan to provide shepherds for the People of God through successors to the Apostles (the Pope and Bishops), and through the successor to the Apostle Peter (the Pope). Vatican I taught about how the Pope has received the gifts of primacy and infallibility in his ministry of service to his brother bishops and to the universal Church. The work of Vatican I was interrupted, when French troops were withdrawn from Rome and Garibaldi’s army of unification of Italy stood at the gates of the city. Vatican I’s deliberations about the Bishop’s role in the Apostolic College and the relationship of Pope and Bishop had to be postponed to a later, undetermined moment.

That moment arrived some 92 years later when the Second Vatican Council met. While reaffirming the teaching of Vatican I about papal primacy and infallibility, the Bishops at Vatican II also addressed what might be called its broader context in presenting the teaching of the Church about bishops, successors of the Apostles. As the Pope is the successor of Peter as head of the college of apostles, so the Bishops – ordained in “apostolic succession” by the laying on of hands – are successors of the Apostles; indeed, the Council teaches that the Apostolic College of every time receives the mandate given by Christ to Peter and the Apostles to preach the Gospel to every creature, with the guarantee that the Holy Spirit will be with them “to lead them into all truth,” until the end of time (cf. Jn 16:13; Mt 28:18-20). This teaching ministry is among the primary tasks of each pastor (bishop) for his own flock or particular church (diocese), just as it is for the Apostolic College of every age, the College of Bishops together with their Head, the Pope. So the Second Vatican Council affirms (LG 22) that “the supreme authority over the whole church, which this [apostolic] college possesses, is exercised in a solemn way in an ecumenical council.”

Church history shows us that the ecumenical councils addressed both the doctrinal and disciplinary issues required by their time. In answer to questions touching directly on the faith of the Church, they proposed formulas that go by the name “dogma”: they declared such dogmas to be part of the Gospel handed on in the Church, to be part of the deposit of faith, to be included in what Christians must believe in response to the Word of God revealed in Christ. Such dogmas, like the teaching of the Council of Nicea in 325 AD about the full divinity of Jesus have become part of the content of the Church’s belief (e.g. we pray the Nicene Creed containing this dogma at Sunday Mass to this day); the teaching opposed to these dogmas is thus rejected as heretical. The ecumenical councils have provided perhaps the most important examples of the work of “development of doctrine” (in the sense of explaining the true meaning of the Scriptures and the doctrines of our faith) throughout the millennia since Christ founded his Church. In the Constitution on Divine Revelation (DV 8), the Council Fathers speak about such doctrinal development in these words: “The tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the church, with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and
words that are being passed on. This comes about through the contemplation and study of believers … and it comes from the preaching of those who, on succeeding to the office of bishop, have received the sure charism of truth.”

I have spent some time looking at the nature of ecumenical councils in order show how the truth of our faith has been safeguarded and illumined by the work of the councils, as promised by Jesus’ gift of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles. Today’s culture is often skeptical about claims to know the truth: so we get along by agreeing that one person’s opinion is as good as another’s, and that we must live by “our own truth.” But Christian faith is tied to history and fact, “words and deeds” as the Council insisted, that make it incompatible with being called a merely subjective experience. The First Vatican Council taught at some length about faith and reason, how they are related in theology and in faith, and how our reason shows the credibility of our faith. The history of apologetics throughout the centuries is testimony to the importance of this task for today as well. Cardinal Newman saw it clearly a century and a half ago when he said, “I want a laity who knows their faith well enough to speak about it convincingly, and knows enough of history to defend it.” In my view, a renewed apologetics for our time should be placed among the unfinished tasks bequeathed to us by the Council, and an important project for every Catholic university.

III. Vatican II: A Pastoral or a Doctrinal Council?

It is true to say that Vatican II was by intention a “pastoral” council; it was decided a priori that its broad scope of ecumenical dialogue (with other Christians) and interreligious dialogue (with other religions), and with society and the “world”, did not call for the formulation of new dogmas to correct errors of faith, as was so often the case in previous councils. We should recall that the Council Fathers met in an extraordinary moment in human history, when during their lifetime not one but two world wars had caused untold destruction to human life, and to human institutions. They met during the so-called “cold war”, under the threat of weapons of mass destruction. They met when vast sections of the world were dominated by the ideology of communism enforced by dictatorships imposed as the spoils of war. They met as European colonialism was collapsing. They saw with their own eyes a Church that had been “Eurocentric” now had bishops from all the continents of the globe take their seats on both sides of the central aisle in St. Peter’s basilica. And they met at a time when the poverty and disease that afflicted so many people in the world clamored for attention and remedy. In this context the Bishops at Vatican II necessarily had to address faith’s questions from the broad perspective of the world’s condition. Thus they determined not to try to fit the broad scope of the teaching they needed to give into “dogmatic” definitions.

From this, however, one cannot infer that the Council’s teachings are not “doctrinal.” Teaching the Gospel of life and salvation is the chief “pastoral” task of the Bishop; 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 (according to the meaning intended and given to them by the Council Fathers). According to the best theological interpretations, the Council intended to resolve and declare the Catholic faith on several questions that had been disputed in past ages. For example, they state “this sacred synod
teaches” that the ordination of a bishop is one of the degrees of the Sacrament of Holy Orders. They similarly affirm the teaching of papal primacy and infallibility of Vatican I, but they also teach that the College of Bishops succeeds in every generation to the Apostolic College, and exercises the supreme or ordinary teaching authority (Magisterium) of the Church given by Christ to the Apostles.

As we have seen concretely, the issue of a “merely pastoral” council has been used by some of the followers of Archbishop Lefebvre to raise questions about whether they may legitimately reject certain teachings and applications of Vatican II, such as the validity and liceity of the Novus Ordo Mass authorized by Pope Paul VI, as called for by the Council, or the Declaration on Religious Liberty (teaching that coercion cannot be used in conversion to belief), and the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions, with its important chapter on Jews, from whom Christians received God’s Revelation in the Old Testament, and with whom they share a common spiritual heritage. But the Council, like all of the Apostolic Tradition, finds its authentic, authoritative interpretation, not in the judgment of individuals or groups (such has been the origin of schisms from the Church), but rather in the judgment of the Church’s Magisterium, according to the promise of Christ to the Apostles. As we heard from the previous citation of Pope John Paul II, the teachings of Vatican II, even if not infallibly proclaimed, must be taken as “normative” (always in accord with their intention and purpose) by all of us Catholics today. Rather than pastoral or doctrinal, we should say of the Council that it was pastoral and doctrinal.

IV. The Legacy of the Council: letter or spirit?

In the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops of 1985 (comprised of the Presidents of the Bishops’ Conferences from throughout the world), Pope John Paul II took the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the close of the Council to ask the Bishops to meet with him to assess the implementation of the Council’s teachings and decisions. In their Final Report the Bishops said, “It is not licit to separate the pastoral character from the doctrinal vigor of the documents. In the same way, it is not legitimate to separate the spirit and the letter of the Council.” [5]

I suppose it’s easy enough to conceive what may be indicated in the use of the term “letter” of the Council. It means what the Council documents themselves say. Of course, this takes into account that, as in any forum where issues are debated openly and freely, the texts finally adopted went through many drafts before achieving a final consensus by the Council Fathers. But the give and take, the task of reformulation in the light of the challenge put forth by individual bishops, was able to make these documents a teaching that received not only majority vote, but vast consensus; the votes on all the documents showed approval by upwards of 90% by the over 2,000 bishops from throughout the world in attendance.

The “spirit” of the Council, on the other hand, is not so easy to pin down. Professor Giuseppe Alberigo, a leader of the “Bologna School,” and editor of a five-volume history of the Council, makes frequent reference to the “spirit of the Council.” His analysis of Pope John XXIII’s Inaugural Address (Gaudet Mater Ecclesia) on October 11, 1962, is summed up in these few words: [Pope John] “does not … intend to dictate the order of the day for the work of the Council; his contribution to the passage of the Church into a new era of history is, instead, that of accentuating the spirit of the Council.”[6] Alberigo is not alone in pointing to the spirit of the
Council as a key to its ongoing interpretation and application; moreover he links this “spirit” to the Council as an “event” – an event that may seem to take on a life of its own: “Priority should be given to the phenomenon of the Council itself as an event that assembled a deliberating body of more than two thousand bishops. The same is true of its decisions, which are to be interpreted not as cold, abstract norms but as an expression and continuation of the event itself.” [7]

Others are less enthusiastic about an emphasis on the spirit of the Council, of an event that continues in the formulations of one school of interpretation or another in contrast to the “letter,” to the Council’s approved constitutions, decrees and declarations. For example, the theologian and commentator Michael Novak, who describes himself as originally an enthusiastic promoter of the “spirit” of the Council, wrote in a 2001 article, “Within a decade of the end of the Council, every major institution in the American Church and in many others was dominated by progressives under the sway of the ‘spirit of Vatican II’.” [8] And Ross Douthat, a New York Times columnist, writes in his new book Bad Religion – How We Became a Nation of Heretics, “A generation of Catholic leaders wasn’t entirely mistaken in claiming that there was a ‘spirit of Vatican II’ easing the Church toward even greater accommodation with the modern world. Nor were they mistaken in seeing an opportunity, as the Council’s decrees passed from theory into practice, to push the Church much further in this direction than the Council had been willing to go.” [9]

Perhaps I should give the last word on letter and spirit to Pope Benedict. In his 2005 Address to the Curia, he commented on the “hermeneutic of discontinuity” and the “spirit” of the Council. “The hermeneutic of discontinuity – according to Benedict – asserts that the texts of the council as such do not yet express the true spirit of the council. It claims that they are the result of compromises in which, to reach unanimity, it was found necessary to keep and reconfirm many old things that are now pointless. However, the true spirit of the council is not to be found in these compromises but instead in the impulses toward the new that are contained in the texts. … Precisely because the texts would only imperfectly reflect the true spirit of the council and its newness, it would be necessary to go courageously beyond the texts and make room for the newness in which the council’s deepest intention would be expressed, even if it were still vague. In a word, it would be necessary not to follow the texts of the council but its spirit.” [10]

If this “last word” of Pope Benedict were accepted, we could still rejoice in the Spirit-filled event that was the Council. But we should also be confident that the daily prayers offered throughout the Church for the Holy Spirit’s guidance of the Council’s work were heard, and guided the documents that the Council Fathers adopted.

V. Interpreting the Council: a “hermeneutic” of reform in continuity with Tradition

In his recent book Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning, Italian theologian Massimo Faggioli presents a brief history of the theological divergences over the past 50 years about the meaning of the Council as a whole, including the many disputes about various passages in its documents. I think it is fair to say that by choosing the word “battle” Faggioli wants to underline the contrasts not only in the interpretation of Vatican II, but within the developments in the theological and historical disciplines in modern times that underlie these divergent interpretations. [11]
It seems to me, however, that the now famous remarks of Pope Benedict XVI in his 2005 Christmas address to the Roman Curia during the first year of his pontificate about the correct interpretation of the Council are not a battle cry, but an appeal to all the Church’s faithful to interpret the Council according to its nature: all the Councils are by nature an exercise in synodality, in seeking the path of unity in faith that will ground our communion with God and one another. Let us listen to this important moment of the papal magisterium of Pope Benedict. The timing of his remarks coincided with the 40th anniversary of the close of Vatican II. He began by quoting St. Basil’s description of the situation of the Church in the 4th century after the Council of Nicea: “The raucous shouting of those who through disagreement rise up against one another, the incomprehensible chatter, the confused din of uninterrupted clamoring has now filled almost the whole of the church, falsifying through excess or failure the right doctrine of the faith.” Benedict says he does not intend to apply Basil’s lament to our situation after Vatican II, but analogously he asks, “Why has the implementation of the council in large parts of the Church thus far been so difficult?”[12]

In response he says it all depends on “interpreting the Council correctly” – what he calls its “proper hermeneutic.” Here is his analysis: “The problems in its implementation arose from the fact that two contrary hermeneutics came face to face and quarreled with each other. One caused confusion, the other, silently but more and more visibly, bore and is bearing fruit. On the one hand, there is an interpretation that I would call ‘a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture’; it has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media and also one trend of modern theology. On the other, there is the ‘hermeneutic of reform,’ of renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church that the Lord has given to us. She is a subject that increases in time and develops, yet always remaining the same, the one subject of the journeying people of God.”[13]

Parenthetically I recall here the title of this Symposium: “Reform and Renewal.” Fr. John O’Malley, SJ, one of tomorrow’s Symposium speakers, has an article in the current issue of Theological Studies that provides a particularly interesting historical analysis of how the notion of “reform” has been applied to the Church. With Fr. O’Malley I think the deliberate juxtaposition of the words “reform” and “renewal” in Pope Benedict’s identification of the “hermeneutic of reform” with “renewal in continuity,” as he outlines the proper interpretative key for the correct implementation of the Council, is indeed significant.[14]

Let me offer a concrete example to illustrate these two “hermeneutics”; these examples are mine, not the Pope’s. About four years ago the Dominican Province in the Netherlands sent a letter to every parish in the country outlining their position on how to meet the shortage of priests that prevents people from having Mass offered in their own parish church every Sunday. They proposed not only the ordination of women and married men, but also advanced the theory that in the absence of an ordained priest, the worshipping assembly could designate its own presider who could lead them in a valid Eucharist. It does not take an expert in theology to recognize such a view as heretical, since only a validly ordained priest can celebrate a valid Eucharist (cf. CCC n. 1411). Here is an example of the confusion caused by an attempted interpretation of Church doctrine that is “in discontinuity, even rupture” with the Tradition of the Church. In order to repair the scandal caused, the Master General of the Order required the Provincial to send to the same parishes an article prepared by the Dominican theologian Fr.
LeGrand, OP, presenting the correct Catholic doctrine on each of the points raised by his Dutch confreres.

As an example of “reform and renewal in continuity,” I propose the Apostolic Constitution Anglicanorum coetibus. Since the ecumenical quest for Church unity was one of the major themes of the Council, it seems appropriate to call Pope Benedict’s response to requests from Anglicans, mostly in what they call the Anglo-Catholic tradition, to be allowed to enter into full communion with the Catholic Church, while retaining some of their Anglican traditions (small “t”), such as marriage and funeral rituals, certain English-language prayers, structures of lay participation, and spiritual life practices. These groups are composed of persons who already fully accept the Catholic faith – in their petitions they proposed the Catechism of the Catholic Church as expression of a faith already shared. In making a disposition for the establishment of Ordinariates for these former Anglicans, clergy and faithful, the Holy Father reaffirmed the venerable traditions of the Anglican patrimony as important to preserve, and as compatible with the variety of ritual and liturgical traditions even in the Latin rite. In his openness to new structures that preserve historic spiritual and liturgical traditions within the communion of full Church unity, the Holy Father offered concrete witness that can help overcome the fear expressed by some in their ecumenical discussions that unity of faith not exclude diversity of expression of an inculturated faith.

The examples Pope Benedict himself alludes to in his 2005 discourse seem to me to merit thorough study and discussion, especially by our Catholic theological faculties throughout the world. Such careful study is necessary to fulfill one of the goals of the Council, i.e., “the Council had to determine in a new way the relationship between the church and the modern era.” He cites, for example, the Galileo case, the French revolution, the clash between the church’s faith and both radical liberalism and the natural sciences, among others.

In his analysis, the Pope makes this general comment about the hermeneutic of reform in continuity as it applies to the various problems arising from the dialogue of the church with modernity. It is precisely in this combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels that the very nature of true reform consists. In this process of innovation in continuity we must learn to understand more practically than before that the Church’s decisions on contingent matters … should necessarily be contingent themselves, precisely because they refer to a specific reality that is changeable in itself. It was necessary to learn to recognize that in these decisions it is only the principles that express the permanent aspect, since they remain as an undercurrent, motivating decisions from within.

In one of the Pope’s examples of particular interest to American Catholics, he observes that as “the modern age had also experienced developments, people came to realize that the American Revolution was offering a model of a modern state that differed from the theoretical model that had emerged during the second phase of the French Revolution.”[15] All of Benedict’s examples are of particular relevance to the dialogue between faith and reason, to the relationship of Christianity with the religions of the world, to the discussions about the true nature of religious freedom. They are important areas for ongoing theological study, especially in view of the call to a new evangelization of the secularized formerly Christian cultures, and of the new apologetics that must accompany such evangelization.
VI. The Catechism of the Catholic Church

As I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, October 11 also marks the 20th anniversary of the promulgation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church by Pope John Paul II. The choice of the date was not a coincidence. Pope Benedict has called the Catechism “an authentic fruit of the Second Vatican Council,” since it was requested by the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in 1985 as an instrument at the service of catechesis, and was produced in collaboration with all the Bishops of the Catholic Church. I had the privilege of serving on the Editorial Committee of seven bishops to work on successive drafts of the Catechism. When a suitable draft was finally ready for consultation, it was sent to all the Bishops of the world, and to a number of theological faculties and catechetical centers, asking them for recommendations and corrections. I well remember that we received over 25,000 proposed changes, which we reviewed with Cardinal Ratzinger (chair of the Commission for the Catechism) and Fr. Christoph Schoenborn, OP, its general editor, now Cardinal Archbishop of Vienna. I can assure you that many of these proposals made a significant contribution to the final text of the Catechism.

Let me recall for a moment why it was felt a new, universal catechism was necessary. First, in the confusion that had arisen after the Council due, in some measure to the competing views about what had changed and what had stayed the same in Church teaching, the bishops generally, many priests, theology professors, religion teachers and catechists asked for help. Secondly, the very scope and nature of the documents of Vatican II required that they be integrated with the entire deposit of faith of the Apostolic Tradition. For example, the Constitution on the Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium) simply presumed the teaching of the Church on the sacraments, defined by the Council of Trent; it did not attempt to formulate an integrated presentation. This still needed to be achieved in a new catechetical presentation. Another example can be found in the social doctrine of the Church, whose principles needed to be integrated with traditional teaching of the virtues and commandments about justice.

This Catechism opted to follow what had become the classical model for catechisms, as found also in the Catechism of the Council of Trent. It presents the entire content of the faith of the Church under four headings, in what it calls the four “pillars” of the faith: the Creed (the faith we profess), the Liturgy and Sacraments (the faith we celebrate), the Commandments, virtues and Beatitudes (the faith we live), and the Our Father (the Church’s prayer of faith). In promulgating this Catechism in 1992 with his Apostolic Constitution Fidei Depositum, Pope John Paul – commenting on its Biblical richness, its frequent references to theological masters and to the saints throughout the centuries, and its inclusion of the vast teachings of the Second Vatican Council – likened it to a “great symphony of our faith,” and solemnly declared it to be “a sure norm for teaching the faith and thus a valid and legitimate instrument for ecclesial communion” (n. 3).

Pope John Paul has left the Church a great legacy in the Catechism. I think it is worth recalling his vision presented in Fidei Depositum, n.3: “I ask all the Church’s Pastors and the Christian faithful to receive this catechism in a spirit of communion and to use it assiduously in fulfilling their mission of proclaiming the faith and calling people to the Gospel life. This catechism is given to them that it may be a sure and authentic reference text for teaching Catholic doctrine and particularly for preparing local catechisms. It is also offered to all the
faithful who wish to deepen their knowledge of the unfathomable riches of salvation (cf. Eph 3:8). It is meant to support ecumenical efforts that are moved by the holy desire for the unity of all Christians, showing carefully the content and wondrous harmony of the catholic faith. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, lastly, is offered to every individual who asks us to give an account of the hope that is in us (cf. 1 Pet 3:15) and who wants to know what the Catholic Church believes.”

Whenever I read the Catechism, I not only focus on the content of my faith, but my heart marvels at the beauty and goodness and love of God’s plan. The Catechism is a necessary antidote to what Pope Benedict has referred to as our contemporary religious illiteracy and “faith fatigue.” It is also, in my view, the best comprehensive example of Benedict’s “hermeneutic of reform, of renewal in continuity of the one … church that the Lord has given us.”

VII. The Year of Faith

Just last December I had the beautiful experience of celebrating the 50th jubilee of my priestly ordination. Since I was living in Rome, I decided to celebrate the occasion on the same day and in the same place: December 20, at the Altar of the Chair in St. Peter’s Basilica. I was especially delighted that fourteen of my classmates were able to make the journey from their various dioceses in the U.S. to concelebrate with me what was also their 50th. As golden jubilees often are, this too was a lovely gathering of family and friends, old and new, to mark a passing anniversary.

Pope Benedict had another idea for our Church’s celebration of the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Council – a Year of Faith in which the whole Church could participate. This year begins on October 11, and will conclude on the Solemnity of Christ the King, 2013, the conclusion of next liturgical year of grace. Such a year of faith reconfirms the hope of Pope John Paul II, who said “Faith is the principal foundation, it is the cornerstone, the essential criterion of the renewal willed by the Council.” It is the panorama of faith that the Catechism proposes, in its content and in its invitation to encounter the person of Jesus through faith. Here is one of the many beautiful, indeed touching, expressions of Benedict’s vision for the year: “We must rediscover a taste for feeding ourselves on the word of God, faithfully handed down by the Church, and on the Bread of life, offered as sustenance for his disciples (cf. Jn 6:51). Indeed, the teaching of Jesus still resounds in our day with the same power: ‘Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life’ (Jn 6:27). The question posed by his listeners is the same that we ask today: ‘What must we do, to be doing the works of God?’ (Jn 6:28). We know Jesus’ reply: ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent’ (Jn 6:29). Belief in Jesus Christ, then, is the way to arrive definitively at salvation.” [Porta Fidei, n. 3]

My final citation from Benedict’s Apostolic Letter “Year of Faith” is a reference to his life-long intellectual and spiritual guide St. Augustine. “Believers, so Saint Augustine tells us, ‘strengthen themselves by believing.’ The saintly Bishop of Hippo had good reason to express himself in this way. As we know, his life was a continual search for the beauty of the faith until such time as his heart would find rest in God. His extensive writings, in which he explains the importance of believing and the truth of the faith, continue even now to form a heritage of
incomparable riches, and they still help many people in search of God to find the right path towards the ‘door of faith’.

“One only through believing, then, does faith grow and become stronger; there is no other possibility for possessing certitude with regard to one’s life apart from self-abandonment, in a continuous crescendo, into the hands of a love that seems to grow constantly because it has its origin in God.” [n. 7]

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. 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 next month’s Synod of Bishops Assembly at the Vatican.

Thank you for inviting me and for listening. God bless you all, and God bless the ongoing “reform and renewal” of our beloved Church.

Notes

5. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. xiii.
13. Ibid., p. 538.