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THE ANGELUS ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ARTICLE REPRINT

Let your speech be “Yes, yes: no, no”; whatever is beyond these comes from the evil one. (Mt. 5:37)

January 2010
Reprint #90

PART 2

ON THE LIVING MAGISTERIUM AND LIVING TRADITION:

Towards a “Thomistic Reception” of Vatican II

PART II:

The Speech of December 22, 2005

[Having concluded that the teachings of the Second Vatican Council do not constitute an act of the magisterium] a new question arises: Did Pope Benedict XVI, in particular in his famous Address of December 22, 2005, express his intention to rectify and correct the teachings of Vatican II so as to understand them in the sense of a continuity with respect to antecedent Catholic Tradition? In another document, his Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church dated March 10, 2009, didn't the Pope say, addressing “some of those who put themselves forward as great defenders of the Council” that “Vatican II embraces the entire doctrinal history of the Church,” and that “[a]nyone who wishes to be obedient to the Council has to accept the faith professed over the centuries, and cannot sever the roots from which the tree draws its life.”¹ There is a fairly clear allusion to

¹ Benedict XVI, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Concerning the Remission of the Excommunication of the Four Bishops Consecrated by Archbishop Lefebvre, on line at www.vatican.va.

the “hermeneutic of rupture” which the Pope denounced at the outset of his pontificate.² “The hermeneutic of discontinuity,” he said, “risks ending in a split between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church.” In this distorted perspective, the Pope says, the nature of a council is misunderstood: “It is considered as a sort of constituent that eliminates an old constitution and creates a new one.”

A. Benedict XVI and the “Hermeneutic of Reform”

Benedict XVI counters the hermeneutic of rupture with what he calls “the hermeneutic of reform,” which corresponds to the initial intention clearly expressed by John XXIII during the opening of the Second Vatican Council on October 11, 1962, when he said that the Council

wishes to transmit the doctrine pure and integral, without any attenuation or distortion....Our duty is not only to guard this precious treasure...but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our era demands of us....

...But from the renewed, serene, and tranquil adherence to all the teaching of the Church in its entirety and preciseness...the Christian, Catholic, and apostolic spirit of the whole world expects a step forward toward a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciousness in faithful and perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary, everything being measured in the forms and proportions of a magisterium which is predominantly pastoral in character.³

Benedict XVI comments that, in order to respond to the program Pope John XXIII proposed, the Second Vatican Council had to accomplish “the synthesis of fidelity and dynamic.”⁴ The hermeneutic of reform corresponds to a “commitment to expressing a specific truth in a new way,” requiring “new thinking on this truth and a new and vital relationship with it.”⁵ The truth had to be presented by taking into consideration “the methods of research and...the literary forms of modern thought.” In the eyes of Benedict XVI, Vatican II thus intended

to inaugurate a new stage in the relationship that ought to exist between faith and human thought. This relationship should, in effect, evolve according to the dictates of history, for the Faith must seek to be expressed in a manner adapted to contemporary thought. The Second Vatican Council was to the modern thought that issued from the 18th century what St. Thomas was to the Aristotelian philosophy of the 13th century. The intention of the Council was indeed to propose the truths of faith in terms of modern thought and thus to be reconciled with it. As St. Thomas did in the 13th century, it was necessary to “set faith in a positive relationship with the form of reason prevalent in his time.”⁶

B. The Council’s Actual Intention

The task of Vatican II was “to determine in a new way the relationship between the Church and the modern era.”⁷ This relationship had become “somewhat stormy”:

In the 19th century under Pius IX, the clash between the Church’s faith and a radical liberalism and the natural sciences, which also claimed to embrace with their knowledge the whole of reality to its limit, stubbornly proposing to make the ‘hypothesis of God’ superfluous, had elicited from the Church a bitter and radical condemnation of this spirit of the modern age. Thus, it seemed that there was no longer any milieu open to a positive and fruitful understanding, and the rejection by those who felt they were the representatives of the modern era was also drastic.⁸

The *Syllabus* of 1864 is like the quintessence of this opposition. But with the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council wished to take the opposite view from what the *Syllabus* taught, and to inaugurate a new type of relationship with the modern era. In his book *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, published in 1982, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger stated that the fundamental intention of Vatican Council II is contained in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. A section of the epilogue is entitled “The question of the proper reception of Vatican Council II.” In it, the [then] Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith stated:

If it is desirable to offer a diagnosis of the text as a whole, we might say that (in conjunction with the texts on religious liberty and world religions) it is a revision of the *Syllabus* of Pius IX, a kind of countersyllabus...the *Syllabus* established a line of demarcation against the determining forces of the nineteenth century: against the scientific and political world view of liberalism. In the struggle against modernism this twofold delimitation was ratified and strengthened....the one-sidedness of the position adopted by the Church under Pius IX and Pius X in response to the situation created by the new phase of history inaugurated by the French Revolution was, to a large extent, corrected *via facti*, especially in

² Benedict XVI, Allocation to the Roman Curia Offering Them His Christmas Greetings, 22 December 2005, on line at www.vatican.va. All quotations from the document are taken from the official English version.

³ John XXIII, “Pope John’s Opening Speech to the Council,” *The Documents of Vatican II with Notes and Comments by Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Authorities*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. et al. (New York: The American Press, 1966), p. 715.

⁴ Christmas Allocation of December 22, 2005.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

Central Europe, but there was still no basic statement of the relationship that should exist between the Church and the world that had come into existence after 1789.⁹

Twenty-three years later, in a lecture that took place at Subiaco when he received the St. Benedict Award for the promotion of life and the family in Europe, on Friday, April 1, 2005, the day before the death of Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Ratzinger explained the Council's intention in greater depth. The Council wished to effect the adaptation of the truths of the Church to the thought of the Age of Enlightenment and of the French Revolution of 1789. Enlightenment thought acknowledges religious values without confounding them with the world and its profane values; it thus makes possible a conciliation of Christianity and modern thought, in a manner different from that achieved in the Middle Ages and the period before 1789, because it accepts in principle the absolute rights of freedom. Such is the new modern mentality which calls for another type of relationship with the Church. "In the pastoral constitution, *On the Church in the Modern World*, Vatican Council II underlined again this profound correspondence between Christianity and the Enlightenment, seeking to come to a true conciliation between the Church and modernity, which is the great heritage that both sides must defend."¹⁰

C. Rupture or Continuity?

In the eyes of Benedict XVI, the initial intention of the Second Vatican Council does not imply any rupture or discontinuity. By proposing the Faith in such a way as to place it in a positive relationship with modern thought as it developed from the Enlightenment and the 18th century, the Council intended to accomplish "the synthesis of fidelity and dynamic." This is the central idea of the 2005 speech, which completes the development of Ratzinger's reflections on this point over the years 1982-2005. "It is precisely in this combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels that the very nature of true reform consists."¹¹ Vatican II could present itself as a sort of countersyllabus without effecting a discontinuity or rupture with the teaching of Pius IX; and this can be explained because, Benedict XVI tells us, the decisions the Church makes in a contingent domain are themselves contingent:

In this process of innovation in continuity we must learn to understand more practically than before that the

Church's decisions on contingent matters—for example, certain practical forms of liberalism or a free interpretation of the Bible—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. On the other hand, not so permanent are the practical forms that depend on the historical situation and are therefore subject to change.

Basic decisions, therefore, continue to be well-grounded, whereas the way they are applied to new contexts can change.¹²

It is true that there is an absolutely fundamental difference between science (or even opinion) and prudence. Science must give the *ratio* pure and simple, that is to say, the reason for which a predicate is attributed to a subject. This attribution is universal and necessary. If you say, for example, that the bishop of Rome is the successor of St. Peter, this proposition is true always and everywhere, and it cannot not be true—it is absolute. Whatever the individual who was legitimately elected by the cardinal bishops of Rome, whatever may be the era of the Church's history, this individual is the successor of St. Peter. Prudence must give the *recta ratio agibilium*, that is to say, not the reason that explains a universal and necessary definition, but the reason that explains why a particular action is decided upon here and now. This reason comes at the end of a train of thought; it is the conclusion of a practical syllogism: in this syllogism, a universal and necessary premise is combined with another, particular and contingent premise. The conclusion indicates what is true, no longer absolutely, but relatively; no longer always and everywhere, but in the context of certain circumstances. The goal of such a syllogism is not to pass from an obscure universal to another, distinct universal. One ought to go from a universal to a particular. In effect, law is a principle that remains too universal for it to be applied as such; it contains in potency a multitude of equally possible conclusions. One must choose the conclusion that is not only possible, but also probable or likely, that is to say, true in particular, taking into account all the circumstances comprising this particularity. While it may be true in one set of circumstances, the same conclusion would be false in different circumstances. The prudential judgment is thus relative to circumstance.

The relativity of a judgment is thus not bad, no more so than its absolute character. What is faulty is to be mistaken about the nature of the

⁹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (1982; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), pp.381-2.

¹⁰ "Cardinal Ratzinger on Europe's Crisis of Culture," July 27, 2005, www.zenit.org/article-13687?l=english. The complete article in English is posted at <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/politics/pg0143.html>.

¹¹ Christmas Allocution, December 22, 2005.

¹² *Ibid.*

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situation and to pronounce a relative judgment in a necessary matter¹³ or an absolute judgment in a contingent matter.¹⁴ St. Thomas explains this in his *Commentary on the Ethics of Aristotle*: one cannot apply a mathematical demonstration to moral matters. A relative judgment is not a false or insufficient judgment. It is a judgment that is true in a certain domain up to a certain point. It suffices in a particular context. Such a judgment will change with the circumstances. More precisely, the goal of a prudential judgment is to determine the means to employ for obtaining an end, not the means in general, which is always and everywhere obligatory, but the means required in these particular circumstances.

D. Relativity and Relativism

However, a judgment, even a prudential judgment, relative to circumstances, is never purely relative, for it has a necessary component: the end does not justify every means. Similarly, when the Church makes decisions relative to circumstances, decisions which are made in contingent domains, even so, these correspond to something necessary as regards principles: the principles applied in a contingent matter are not necessarily contingent. Moreover, there is a significant difference between making a decision in a contingent matter (that is to say, to make a prudential act) and to pose an act in a contingent manner (which characterizes every human act, whether prudential or scientific). It is clear that every act emanating from a human subject is performed contingently, in the sense that the human subject, being endowed with reason and liberty, could have not posed this act; and in the sense that this act is inscribed in history in the framework of a duration in which no one moment exactly resembles another. But this does not imply that every act of a reasonable and free agent, inscribed in time, can only be done in contingent matters.¹⁵ If by his body man

is the subject of movement, is inscribed in duration, and is partly contingent, by his soul he can attain necessary and immutable truths that prescind from historical contingency. And in fact, in large part, the declarations of the magisterium of the modern era prior to Vatican II concern necessary matters. Even though they are inscribed in the historical context of the 19th century, an age different from ours, the declarations of Pope Pius IX condemning religious liberty and the false principles of the Enlightenment are definitive and necessary: Pope Pius IX condemned the error of liberalism *per se*, as it must be expressed always and everywhere, and which is formulated in a principle that remains in universal and necessary opposition to divinely revealed doctrine.

E. The Continuity of Faith and Reason according to St. Thomas

It is, moreover, inexact to say that St. Thomas Aquinas achieved the conciliation between faith and Aristotelian philosophy, “thereby setting faith in a positive relationship with the form of reason prevalent in his time.”¹⁶ St. Thomas reconciled faith and reason, and not the Faith and Aristotelianism, or faith and the rational thought of his time, which would be the modern thought of the 13th century. The Thomist synthesis is good for all times. As Pope Pius X said in the *Motu Proprio Doctoris Angelici* of June 29, 1914, it represents a body of principles which are the means “of refuting all the errors of all the ages.” He adds: “...the capital theses in the philosophy of St. Thomas are not to be placed in the category of opinions capable of being debated one way or another, but are to be considered as the foundations upon which the whole science of natural and divine things is based.”¹⁷ Pope Pius XII was to say the same thing some 30 years later in the Encyclical *Humani Generis* of August 12, 1950: “For this philosophy, acknowledged and accepted by the Church, safeguards the genuine validity of human knowledge, the unshakable metaphysical principles of sufficient reason, causality, and finality, and finally the mind’s ability to attain certain and unchangeable truth” (§29). The synthesis achieved by St. Thomas at a specific moment of history is the definitive, necessary and sufficient reconciliation of the Faith and the philosophy natural to human reason. It is possible, certainly, to make progress in a better understanding of Revelation and to try to delve more deeply into the divine mysteries, having recourse to the lights of reason guided by faith. “And, indeed, reason illustrated by faith, when it zealously,

of art or prudence. That is why all mathematics classes are alike, whereas no artistic masterpiece or diplomatic treaty resembles another.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, Allocution of December 22, 2005.

¹⁷ English version online at <http://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/doctoris.htm>.

piously, and soberly seeks, attains with the help of God some understanding of the mysteries.”¹⁸ But in this search, reason illustrated by faith cannot change instruments: its natural and necessary tool continues to be the perennial philosophy in its basic principles, perfectly synthesized by St. Thomas. That is why there is no continuity possible between the Faith and the modern thought that issued from the 18th century; churchmen cannot entertain the ambition of expressing the Faith “through the literary forms of modern thought,” if by that is meant the modern philosophy of the Enlightenment.

F. The Rupture of Relativism in the Thought of Benedict XVI

In his speech of December 2005, Pope Benedict XVI reasons as if every decision, by the very fact of its belonging to history, can only concern a contingent matter and only express a truth relative to circumstances. One could not be more explicit in making doctrinal relativism a matter of principle. And, moreover, the example the Pope adduces to illustrate the nature of true reform, which according to him consists in a “combination of continuity and discontinuity,” indicates very clearly that it is not only the application of the principles that changes, but the principles themselves. He tells us: “...it was necessary to give a new definition to the relationship between the Church and the modern State that would make room impartially for citizens of various religions and ideologies, merely assuming responsibility for an orderly and tolerant coexistence among them and for the freedom to practise their own religion.” Yet there is no continuity, but rather a complete discontinuity between the new principle of *Dignitatis Humanae*, equivalent to the new definition of the relationship between Church and State, and the principle reiterated by Leo XIII in the Encyclical *Immortale Dei* of November 1, 1885, according to which

it is a public crime to act as though there were no God. So, too, is it a sin for the State not to have care for religion as something beyond its scope, or as of no practical benefit; or out of many forms of religion to adopt that one which chimes in with the fancy; for we are bound absolutely to worship God in that way which He has shown to be His will. All who rule, therefore, would hold in honour the holy name of God, and one of their chief duties must be to favour religion, to protect it, to shield it under the credit and sanction of the laws, and neither to organize nor enact any measure that may compromise its safety. (§6)

It is absolutely inexact to assert, as does Benedict XVI, that “the Second Vatican Council, recognizing and making its own an essential principle of the modern State with the Decree on Religious Freedom, has recovered the deepest patrimony of

the Church.” The teaching of Vatican II on religious liberty effected, rather, a rupture with respect to all of Tradition and thus with respect to the deepest patrimony of the Church.

G. The Real Significance of the Speech of December 22, 2005

The hermeneutic of reform as conceived by Pope Benedict XVI is not, then, the expression of a return to the Tradition of the Church. Benedict XVI doubtless is trying to establish a continuity between Vatican II and the teachings of the previous magisterium. But this is not continuity as the popes have always understood it until the last Council, continuity in the unaltered transmission of the same substantially immutable doctrine. Continuity as understood by Pope Benedict XVI is the continuity of a new living tradition, continuity in the relativism by which one thinks it possible to overcome contradictions by employing the principle that the teachings of the Church are expressed in a matter that is always contingent.

To conclude, we shall examine more closely this new notion of living tradition, at least as understood by Pope Benedict XVI.

PART III: The New Relativism of Living Tradition

The doctrinal relativism expressed in the Christmas address of December 22, 2005, corresponds in the current pope’s thinking to the distorted notion of Tradition that is in line with the *Motu Proprio Ecclesia Dei Adflicta* of John Paul II. This notion is described in Pope Benedict XVI’s catechesis on the Church found in the general audiences of April 26, May 3, and May 10, 2006, published in *L’Osservatore Romano*. Tradition is no longer defined as the transmission of the deposit of divinely revealed truths. It is first of all conceived as an Experience and a Life.

A. Tradition Redefined

In the fifth allocution of April 26, Pope Benedict XVI expressed himself thus:

The Holy Spirit appears to us as the guarantor of the active presence of the mystery in history, the One who ensures its realization down the centuries. Thanks to the Paraclete, it will always be possible for subsequent genera-

¹⁸Vatican Council I, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, Chap. 4, Dz. 1796.

tions to have the same experience of the Risen One that was lived by the apostolic community at the origin of the Church, since it is passed on and actualized in the faith, worship and communion of the People of God, on pilgrimage through time....The Church's apostolic Tradition consists in this transmission of the goods of salvation which, through the power of the Spirit makes the Christian community the permanent actualization of the original communion.¹⁹

Tradition is not first and foremost the transmission of dogmas, the perpetual teaching of revealed truths, nor the administration of the sacraments and the celebration of divine worship. It is undoubtedly this transmission, but as the prolongation of the communitarian experience of the origins: by means of this transmission, the communion of today continues the communion of yesterday, the lived experience of past generations continues in the lived experience of present generations.

A little farther on, we find another definition that expresses again the same idea:

Tradition is not the transmission of things or words, a collection of dead things. Tradition is the living river that links us to the origins, the living river in which the origins are ever present, the great river that leads us to the gates of eternity.²⁰

In the sixth allocution of May 3, Benedict recapitulated his theme:

[Apostolic Tradition] is not a collection of things or words, like a box of dead things. Tradition is the river of new life that flows from the origins, from Christ down to us, and makes us participate in God's history with humanity.²¹

A little farther on he adds:

So it is that Tradition is the living Gospel, proclaimed by the Apostles in its integrity on the basis of the fullness of their unique and unrepeatable experience: through their activity the faith is communicated to others, even down to us, until the end of the world. Tradition, therefore, is the history of the Spirit who acts in the Church's history through the mediation of the Apostles and their successors, in faithful continuity with the experience of the origins.²²

B. A Coherent Discourse, But Contrary to the Church's Teaching

One readily understands what Benedict XVI means when he states that "Vatican II embraces the entire doctrinal history of the Church," and that "Anyone who wishes to be obedient to the Council

has to accept the faith professed over the centuries, and cannot sever the roots from which the tree draws its life."²³ The "entire doctrinal history of the Church" and the "faith professed over centuries" of which he spoke in March 2009 is the living Tradition of which he spoke to us in May 2006, namely "the history of the Spirit who acts in the Church's history through the mediation of the Apostles and their successors, in faithful continuity with the experience of the origins." The Pope's theme holds together perfectly from one end to the other. But it is a theme that gives an absolutely new definition to the magisterium and Tradition, in complete opposition to the teachings of the magisterium prior to the Second Vatican Council.

C. An Unchangeable Tradition and a Living Magisterium

It is true that the Church renders more explicit the expression of revealed truths and thus procures to the faithful a deeper understanding of the deposit of the Faith. It is in this sense that it could be said that the traditional magisterium was also *a living magisterium*. "Living" contrasts with "posthumous." This attribute concerns the subject and the act of the magisterium (*magisterium* as understood in its first and second senses), but not the object of the magisterium (*magisterium* understood in its third sense).

From the viewpoint of the second sense (*magisterium* understood as the act of teaching), the posthumous magisterium is the simple repetition of the teaching formerly given authoritatively by the living and authentic magisterium after it ceased. It is carried out by writing. The living magisterium is the ongoing exercise of the authentic magisterium. It is carried out principally by oral preaching and incidentally by writing.

From the viewpoint of the first sense (*magisterium* understood as the subject who exercises the act of teaching), the magisterium is living in the sense that in every age of history the prudence of pastors is always sufficiently inventive for enlightening the minds of the faithful and proposing to them the same truth in a manner more thoroughly adapted to their circumstances. In the disputed question No. 11 in the series *De Veritate*, St. Thomas shows in Article 4 that teaching is a work belonging to the active life. In effect, the act of teaching concerns a twofold object, a twofold matter. There is the truth to be taught: in relation to this object, teaching is a work of the contemplative life. There is the audience to be taught: in relation to this object,

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, "Communion in Time: Tradition," General Audience, April 26, 2006, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2006.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Benedict XVI, "The Apostolic Tradition of the Church," General Audience, May 3, 2006, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2006.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Benedict XVI, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Concerning the Remission of the Excommunication of the Four Bishops Consecrated by Archbishop Lefebvre, on line at www.vatican.va.

teaching is a work of the active life.²⁴ Affecting the audience to be taught are variable circumstances to which the preaching should be adapted. The audience is not uniform, and it may appear in quite different conditions. These diverse conditions will be, for example, errors holding sway over the faithful which endanger their correct understanding of revealed truth and render necessary a more explicit exposition of doctrine.²⁵ These diverse conditions also correspond to the diversity of time and place which make necessary diversely appropriate explications at the level of positive ecclesiastical law.²⁶ In this sense, the transmission of Catholic doctrine is *a living preaching because it is a pastoral preaching*, the pastor being the one who uses discernment and takes into account the dispositions of his flock (according to the scholastic adage: *quidquid recipitur in aliquo est in eo per modum recipientis*—“whatever is received into anything must be received according to the condition of the receiver”²⁷). This is why such teaching is principally oral.²⁸

But this has nothing to do with the “pastoral magisterium” Vatican II claims to express. Actually, the magisterium of the Second Vatican Council was intended to be pastoral because it changed the truth under the pretext of adapting the preaching of the truth to the understanding of modern man. Now if the magisterium is living in the first and second senses of the word, objective Tradition, which is identical to the magisterium understood in the third sense (and which equates to dogmas, namely, divinely revealed truths which are the object of the preaching of the magisterium), is not living, but unchangeable. The ecclesiastical preaching only becomes more precise when the pastors of the Church exercise their magisterium in order to give a deeper *understanding* of dogma. But the dogma does not change. There is progress, not in the dogma, but in the understanding of the dogma by the faithful, who are better protected against the assaults of error. It is the passage from an implicit knowledge to an explicit knowledge; the change affects the mode by which the minds of the faithful will exercise their adherence to the object of faith. The object of faith remains unchanged, and it is formally revealed before being defined by the pope as it is afterward. For example, the faithful implicitly believed in the Immaculate Conception

by believing explicitly that the Blessed Virgin possessed the fullness of grace (a truth taught in Sacred Scripture in the Gospel according to St. Luke, 1:28). This fullness of grace involves many things, and in particular the conception free from original sin. This particular consequence was made explicit by the definition of Pope Pius IX (whereas another particular consequence was to be made explicit by Pius XII when he proclaimed the dogma of the Assumption). Since then, the faithful must believe not only implicitly, but explicitly in the truth of the Immaculate Conception. The evolution bears precisely and exclusively upon the *mode of belief*: the way in which the believer exercises his act, implicitly or explicitly, and not on the object of the belief.

D. From the Living Magisterium to the New Living Tradition

In short, a certain merely extrinsic development of dogma can be admitted, but never intrinsic, that is to say a development, not of the dogma *qua* dogma, but of the understanding of it possessed by the faithful. On the one hand, the progress of this understanding must be “in the same dogma, with the same sense and the same understanding,”²⁹ without calling in question the objective nature of the revealed deposit. On the other hand, it is the infallible and constant magisterium, the traditional magisterium of the Church and it alone, that must give this understanding, not simple natural reason nor philosophy alone. In the Constitution *Dei Filius*, the First Vatican Council consecrated by its authority this essential property of the ecclesiastical magisterium, namely, that it is to be a constant magisterium:

[T]hat understanding of its sacred dogmas must be perpetually retained, which Holy Mother Church has once declared; and there must never be recession from that meaning under the specious name of a deeper understanding.³⁰

To this definition corresponds the following canon:

If anyone shall have said that it is possible that to the dogmas declared by the Church a meaning must sometimes be attributed according to the progress of science, different from that which the Church has understood and understands: let him be anathema.³¹

Even if the Church’s preaching is exercised contingently, in the framework of historical

²⁴ This duality of matter is well rendered by the construction of the Latin verb “*docere*,” which takes a double accusative.

²⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q. 1, Art. 9, ad 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Art. 7, ad 2 and ad 3

²⁷ *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 76, Art. 2, 3rd objection.

²⁸ Written expression involves certain limits oral teaching escapes. That is why the latter is the preferred means expression of prudence, which must maintain enough flexibility to deal with circumstances as they arise. This reality shows us why the Catholic religion is not a “Religion of the Book.”

²⁹ Vatican Council I, Constitution *Dei Filius*, Chap. 4, in Dz. 1800.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, Canon 3 of Chapter 4, in Dz. 1818.

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circumstances, its object is the transmission of divinely revealed truths, which are not contingent, but necessary and immutable. The confusion introduced by the Discourse of December 22 is on this level: one has passed from a living magisterium (ecclesiastical preaching that is done in order to transmit the same truth *in a contingent manner*, namely, by taking circumstances into account) to a living Tradition (ecclesiastical preaching that is exercised *in contingent matters*, namely, in order to establish a renewed and changing relationship between faith and contemporary thought as it changes from age to age). Thus one has passed from extrinsic and homogeneous dogmatic development to intrinsic and relativist development.

Epilogue

The program of the Toulouse colloquium was to “focus on the ways in which Thomistic theology can contribute to a reception of Vatican II that honors the Council as an act of living Tradition.” We can say here and now, without fear of being mistaken, that their reflection will be trapped by the difficulty in which it has been circumscribed from the outset. If you admit the assumption of the living Tradition, then no serious critique of the conciliar teachings will be possible. It will be necessary, willy-nilly, to admit religious freedom, ecumenism, and the new ecclesiology into the common patrimony of the Church, even at the price of contradiction, or rather thanks to the contradiction raised to the first principle of all theological reflection. For if Tradition is living, then movement is being and everything becomes possible... and imaginable.

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The only “Thomistic reception” which seems to us conceivable is the one that will begin by unambiguously defining Tradition and magisterium in conformity with the teachings of Pope Pius IX and the First Vatican Council. In these conditions, and only in these conditions, can we nourish the hope of interpreting the teachings of Vatican II “in the light of Tradition,” understood as all the popes and Catholic bishops understood it until the Council.

Fr. Jean-Michel Gleize

Translated exclusively by Angelus Press from the *Courier de Rome*, June-August 2009, pp.1-5.