

## THE THEOLOGICAL NOTES AND THE INTERPRETATION OF DOCTRINE

HAROLD E. ERNST

*[The author first examines the application of the qualificatio theologica or theological norm as an aid to doctrinal interpretation in Catholic neo-Scholastic theology. He then explores the emergence of related interpretive questions at Vatican II, particularly with regard to two sections of Lumen gentium. His examination suggests a hermeneutical principle for interpreting the documents of Vatican II, namely the importance of being attentive to the nature of the council as a transitional event in Catholic theology. His study also highlights the continuing need for a consistent method of qualifying doctrinal statements.]*

IN HIS LANDMARK ESSAY entitled “The Abiding Significance of Vatican II,” Karl Rahner characterized the theology of the council as representing a transition from the rigid neo-Scholasticism of the 20th century to a more biblical and ecumenical theology appropriate to its time. Although Rahner noted the profound deficiencies of the neo-Scholastic method in its final and calcified form, he also issued this caution: “It should not however be inferred that this aspect [the neo-Scholastic influence on Vatican II] was merely obscure and negative. On the contrary, one could wish that students of theology even today were a little more aware of the conceptual exactitude of neo-Scholasticism and of its orientation to declarations of the magisterium.”<sup>1</sup> In this article I begin by examining one aspect of this “conceptual exactitude,” the neo-Scholastic *qualificatio theologica* or theological note. Next I consider the emergence of interpretive issues at Vatican II, particularly in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, and the continuing need in theology for a means of evaluating the authority of doctrinal statements. As part of this analysis, I develop a hermeneutical principle for interpreting the documents of Vatican II.

While commenting on the overall inadequacy of the 20th-century neo-Scholastic method in which he was trained, Avery Dulles lists as one of its values: “[t]he recognition that not all conclusions were equally certain. Each thesis had to have a theological note attached to it, indicating the

<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* 20, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 94.

degree of its certitude or probability, as the case might be.”<sup>2</sup> These theological notes were brief phrases qualifying the individual theological propositions that made up the various tracts in the manuals of neo-Scholastic theology. In addition to the summary judgment represented by the theological note itself: “reasons were given for the note in question: for example, the definitions of popes and councils, the clear teaching of Scripture, theological reasoning, the general consent of the fathers or of the theologians.”<sup>3</sup>

Theological censures employed to characterize the degree of error in a given proposition were the negative corollaries of theological notes and appeared earlier in the history of theology. Yves Congar has pointed out that Thomas Aquinas applied “less canonical, more scientific qualifications”—such as *stultum*, *ridiculum* and *ineptum*—to arguments that he regarded as reflecting a *defectum sapientiae*.<sup>4</sup> Various censures were later occasionally used by popes and councils in condemning heresies, perhaps most notably against Martin Luther in the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*.<sup>5</sup> Lists of both positive notes and negative censures became increasingly elaborate in the post-Tridentine period, but “the rise of neo-scholasticism brought with it a meticulous distinction between the various notes and censures.”<sup>6</sup>

#### A NEO-SCHOLASTIC SYSTEM OF THEOLOGICAL NOTES

A standard work detailing the use of the theological notes as applied in neo-Scholastic method just prior to Vatican II is the *De valore notarum theologiarum et de criteriis ad eas dignoscendas* authored by Sixtus [Sisto] Cartechini (1914–1994). A brief overview of the specific theological notes described in his small book will serve to highlight the extreme care with which the neo-Scholastic theologian sought to distinguish the precise degree of certitude associated with individual propositions. For each of the ten categories in his systematization, Cartechini, a Jesuit professor at the Gregorian University, named one or more theological notes and their corresponding censures, characterized the degree of assent required and the

<sup>2</sup> Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 43.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Yves Congar, *La foi et la théologie*, *Le mystère chrétien* (Tournai: Desclée, 1962) 168 (translation here and hereafter mine).

<sup>5</sup> *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, ed. Henricus Denzinger, rev. ed. Adolfus Schönmetzer, 36th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1963) no. 1492.

<sup>6</sup> Johann Finsterholzl, “Theological Notes,” in *Sacramentum mundi*, vol. 6 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) 228–29.

nature of the sin involved in denial, and supplied a specific theological proposition to serve as an example.<sup>7</sup>

The first category named is *dogma fidei*, and includes the alternative and equivalent notes *de fide*, *de fide catholica*, and *de fide divina et catholica*. This includes all those truths “contained in the written Word of God or tradition” that have been taught by the ordinary or extraordinary teaching authority of the Church as divinely revealed.<sup>8</sup> Cartechini notes that the doctrines addressed here include not everything revealed, but only those concerning faith and morals (*de fide et moribus*) and thus ordering us toward salvation.<sup>9</sup> Any teaching categorized as *de fide* demands absolute assent based on the light of divine faith, and its denial would incur the censure of *haeresis*. Dogmas that have been solemnly defined as such by a pope or a general council may be further distinguished by the theological note *de fide definita*, to differentiate them from those taught by the ordinary and universal magisterium and appearing “in creeds, in catechisms, in preaching, or in the teaching of theologians.”<sup>10</sup> Consider as examples the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the inerrancy of Scripture: though both could receive the note *dogma fidei* (or the equivalent alternatives named above), only the former could also be designated *de fide definita*.<sup>11</sup>

Cartechini is at pains in the description of his second category to note that not all doctrines are dogmas, and that merely being defined as true by a pope or council is not a sufficient condition for being designated *dogma fidei*. The theological note *de fide ecclesiastica definita* is used to demark a truth of faith solemnly defined by the Church but not as revealed, such as the validity of receiving the Eucharist under one species.<sup>12</sup> Because it is not included in revelation it cannot be considered a dogma, and even though it is defined as binding in faith, it cannot bind in precisely the same way. Cartechini notes that just as there are “truths to be believed not with the necessity of divine faith but by ecclesiastical faith,” so denial of such a truth would “seem to be heresy not in the strict sense according as it is against divine faith, but in a broader sense in so far as it is against ecclesiastical faith.”<sup>13</sup> The distinction between *de fide ecclesiastica* and *de fide divina* is even more clearly developed in Cartechini’s treatment of the degree of assent that is appropriate: “Ecclesiastical faith is in true interior obedience, that is, through submission of intellect and will, and it would always be a grave sin, at least of the vice of rashness (*saltem vitii temeritatis*), not to

<sup>7</sup> Sixtus Cartechini, *De valore notarum theologiarum et de criteriis ad eas dignoscendas* (Rome: Gregorian University, 1951). For an overview of the ten categories delineated, see especially his summary chart on pages 134–35.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 17–18.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 41.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 16–17.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 135.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 43.

offer assent to these definitions. *But the assent that must be offered is according to how they are formulated. . . .*<sup>14</sup> Thus Cartechini insists that the precise nature of the assent required will vary with the specific language of the definition in question, and warns against too easily defaulting to a single interpretation for all such doctrines.

The third category, *de fide divina*, is the reverse of the second category relative to the first, in that it concerns those truths that are in revelation but which have not been defined by the Church. As Cartechini explains: “Divine faith, as it is revealed, is essentially not different from divine and Catholic faith, but only . . . extrinsically as far as one is clearly proposed by God, the other by God and by the Church.”<sup>15</sup> One example offered, among others, is that Christ merited the glory of his body and the exaltation of his name.<sup>16</sup> In this category, too, the assent required will vary according to the nature of the individual proposition—specifically it will depend on the clarity with which an individual proposition is included in revelation, perhaps requiring sensitivity to issues of scriptural interpretation. As for the corresponding censure, Cartechini says: “One who denies a matter clearly contained either in Scripture or in Tradition as revealed, commits a mortal sin against divine faith, but is not a heretic because he or she does not sever himself or herself from an opinion expressly proposed by the Church. Some call this erroneous in faith: erroneous, if you attend to that which is properly error: for *error*, if it is taken up in a strict sense, is not only something false, but a *falsehood which is opposed to something clearly true*, or certain, that which is commonly known among all as certain.”<sup>17</sup> Thus in order to incur the censure *error in fide*, one must affirm something contrary to a proposition that is clearly and certainly held by the Catholic faithful as a revealed truth.

*Proxima fidei*, the fourth category, is the theological note applied to propositions somewhat less certainly held than those designated *de fide divina*. These are opinions that, while also not expressly proposed by the magisterium, are *almost unanimously* regarded as revealed, such as the doctrine of the satisfaction of Christ. “In other words: they are propositions which, although not entirely certain, nevertheless probably, and as it seems to many, are of the faith.”<sup>18</sup> This note does not require absolute, but theological assent, and its corresponding censure is *errori proxima*.<sup>19</sup>

The fifth category is *theologice certum*, applied to theological conclusions deduced from one revealed proposition and another proposition that is certain in reason, such as the conclusion that the existence of God is

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 50, emphasis mine.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 56.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 67.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 55.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 66, emphasis there.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 134.

rationally demonstrable.<sup>20</sup> A sixth category, *doctrina catholica*, includes doctrines that have been formally and categorically proposed as revealed but which have not been expressly and authentically taught by the Church (e.g., that the inspired authors of the biblical texts are true but secondary authors).<sup>21</sup> Each of these two categories require theological assent, which according to the individual conclusion may be derived from the light of faith, or reason, or the teaching authority of the one proposing. While the censure corresponding to *doctrina catholica* is *saltem temeraria*, to deny a proposition designated *theologice certum* incurs the more substantial censure *error in theologia*.<sup>22</sup> Cartechini notes that knowingly making such a denial is a serious sin because of the close connection of the proposition with faith, but it is likewise distinguished from *error in fide* by the fact that the *theologice certum* conclusion is only certain within the realm of theological speculation.<sup>23</sup>

The remaining categories, somewhat less important, will be only briefly sketched. Category seven includes the notes *commune et certum*, *certum*, and *moraliter certum*. An individual proposition is designated *commune* if it is held by all the theological schools, while *certum* is applied in contradistinction to *theologice certum* to indicate that the conclusion is less immediately or less clearly deduced from a revealed truth.<sup>24</sup> The denial of a proposition of this kind, such as that the sacraments are causes of grace, would be assigned the censure *temeraria*.<sup>25</sup> The eighth category includes the notes *securum* or *tutum*, indicating teachings that are safely held, such as those contained in doctrinal decrees of the Roman congregations. *Communius* and *communissimum* are the notes applied to teachings in the ninth category, such as that sin is removed by the infusion of grace, which are less certain than those designated *commune*. The ninth and last category includes the notes *probabile* and *probabilius* for conclusions the certitude of which rests upon either their external authority or their internal nature, such as Molinism and Bañezism. These last two categories do not require assent, and the corresponding censures that are applied include *captiosa*, *scandalosa* and *piarum aurium offensiva*.<sup>26</sup>

This system of theological notes clearly exhibits the excruciating care with which the neo-Scholastic theologian sought to categorize individual propositions according to their precise degree of certitude. This recognition of the substantial range of authoritativeness found in various theological propositions, acute attention to their form, and a sensitivity to their exact qualification, is itself of considerable and lasting value. Nevertheless, the

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 134.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 99.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 133–35.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 68–70.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 98.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 135.

theological notes as applied in neo-Scholastic method were also subject to a number of limitations to their ongoing usefulness. Among these, I would highlight the following two. First, they are *proposition-based*, reflecting the neo-Scholastic predilection for the logical deduction of specific conclusions from established premises, and may lead to regarding theology as nothing more than enlarging the set of those propositions. Second, they are primarily oriented toward the assertion of *authority*, arising as they have from the theological censures used in the condemnations associated with various historical challenges, and therefore may neglect attention to the complexity of the believing subject. One should note however that both of these limitations concern potential, not necessary, negative aspects associated with the general use of theological notes.

#### INTERPRETIVE CONSIDERATIONS AT VATICAN II

Whatever their relative strengths and weaknesses, the theological notes do not appear prominently in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, the neo-Scholastic method in general was explicitly rejected by the bishops in their insistence, as Dulles notes, that “the preparatory schemas of 1962, drawn up principally by Roman professors. . . [and] strictly scholastic in thought and expression” be discarded and redrawn.<sup>27</sup> Dulles explains that a predominant reliance on neo-Scholasticism “was practically ruled out by the purposes of the council, as articulated by Pope John XXIII and as accepted by the bishops themselves. The council was to be pastoral in nature, in the sense of being concerned with the effective proclamation of the gospel and with enabling the Church to show forth, in its actual practice, the features of Christ the Good Shepherd. Scholasticism was not oriented toward proclamation or toward spiritual renewal, but rather toward subtle and abstract discussions that were rather remote from conduct.”<sup>28</sup>

What I have said here about neo-Scholasticism in general is true with regard to the theological notes in particular. The entire system of the theological notes is oriented toward qualifying the various abstract, even arcane, propositions that made up the bulk of neo-Scholastic Catholic theology. It is not, therefore, surprising that the theological notes were not overtly employed by a council dedicated to pastoral renewal, ecumenical concerns, and an openness to the modern world.

In fact, the only place in the council documents where a question regarding a theological note explicitly appears is in the *Notificationes* attached as an appendix to the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen*

<sup>27</sup> Dulles, *The Craft of Theology* 121–22.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 122–23.

*gentium*, which reads in part: “A question has been asked concerning the *theological note* that should be given to the teaching that is put forward in the schema *De Ecclesia* and is submitted for voting.”<sup>29</sup> The *Notificationes*, along with the longer and more elaborate *Nota explicativa praevia*, were intended by Pope Paul VI “as a final effort on his part to win over the coterie of bishops and experts, belonging to the minority, who had resolutely and ceaselessly opposed the doctrine of collegiality ever since the Second Session” of the council.<sup>30</sup> The addition of these appendices, though highly unusual and controversial at the time, had the salutary effect of dramatically reducing the number of *non placet* votes delivered in the final balloting, thereby achieving near unanimous support for the document.<sup>31</sup>

Despite their title, the *Notificationes* may provide very little in the way of explanatory clarification. In his commentary on the text, Joseph Ratzinger laments that “[w]hat the Theological Commission has to say on this point is not altogether clear.”<sup>32</sup> Responding to the question regarding the theological note, the Commission says only “As is self-evident, the council text is always to be interpreted according to general rules that are known by all.”<sup>33</sup> Of course, if these “general rules” really were “known by all,” there would seem to have been no reason for such a question to have been raised in the first place. The Commission goes on to reproduce the text of one of its earlier declarations, which reads:

Taking into account conciliar custom and the pastoral aim of the present council, this holy synod *defines as binding on the church only those matters concerning faith and morals which it openly declares to be such.* The other matters which the synod puts forward as the teaching of the supreme magisterium of the church, each and every member of the faithful *should accept and embrace according to the mind of the synod itself, which is clear either from the subject matter or from the way it is said, in accordance with the rules of theological interpretation.*<sup>34</sup>

Ratzinger interprets this, quite reasonably, as an attempt by the pope to set forth a *via media* between two schools of thought that emerged during the deliberation on the document. The first he identifies as “‘minimalists’:

<sup>29</sup> *Lumen gentium, Notificationes*. Translation from *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Vol. 2: Trent to Vatican II*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990) 898.

<sup>30</sup> Xavier Rynne [Francis X. Murphy], *Vatican Council II* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996) 407.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 412–14.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: Announcements and Prefatory Notes of Explanation,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 1, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, trans. Richard Strachan (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967) 298.

<sup>33</sup> *Lumen gentium, Notificationes*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

those who were the minority at the council and who, having vainly opposed the idea of an essentially pastoral council, now conclude from the pastoral character of Vatican II that it has no relevance in the sphere of doctrine.”<sup>35</sup> At the opposite extreme were those taking a “view that raises most of the Council’s declarations practically (though not technically) to the status of dogmas.”<sup>36</sup>

The distinction suggested in the text is one between those teachings which are strictly binding (*tenenda*) and those which ought to be accepted and embraced (*excipere et amplecti debent*) to varying degrees in accordance with the intention (*iuxta mentem*) of the council. The former, presumably, can be easily identified by their being expressly put forward (*ut talis aperte declaraverit*) as pertaining to faith or morals (*de rebus fidei vel morum*). The degree of acceptance warranted by the latter, however, would seem to require judicious discernment on the part of the interpreter. It is asserted that the intention of the council with regard to these teachings is made known (“is clear” may be a too optimistic translation of *innotescit* in this context) either from the subject matter (*ex subiecta materia*) or from the manner of formulation (*ex dicendi ratione*). Such judgments are to be effected, according to the Commission, by following the norms of theological interpretation (*secundum normas theologicae interpretationis*).

What, precisely, are these norms of theological interpretation? I regard this text as pointing directly to the methodological techniques of doctrinal interpretation supporting the neo-Scholastic system of theological notes. Despite the council’s general rejection of neo-Scholastic method as inappropriate to its pastoral and ecumenical aims, when it was faced with the question of qualifying the authority of its own teaching, it implicitly relied upon the only extant system that was commonly known. This is altogether unsurprising, of course, when one considers that a large majority of the participating bishops, as well as the *periti*, had received their own theological training in the neo-Scholastic method. Although the council avoided using the *terminology* of the theological notes themselves, the *methodological approach* underlying that system is directly referred to in the *Notificationes*.

The same question, though less directly, is raised within the text of the Constitution itself in no. 25 concerning the teaching office of the bishops. The relevant text reads as follows:

The bishops, when they are teaching in communion with the Roman pontiff, are to be respected by all as witnesses to the divine and catholic truth; and the faithful ought to concur with their bishop’s judgment concerning faith and morals which he

<sup>35</sup> Ratzinger, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” 298–99.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 299.



delivers in the name of Christ, and *they are to adhere to this with a religious assent of the mind*. The religious assent of will and intellect is to be given in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman pontiff even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*; in such a way, that is, that his *supreme teaching authority is respectfully acknowledged, and sincere adherence given to decisions he has delivered, in accordance with his manifest mind and will which is communicated chiefly by the nature of the documents, by the frequent repetition of the same doctrine or by the style of verbal expression*.<sup>37</sup>

Here, too, the council has had to concern itself with the nature and degree of the assent required to specific teachings, in this case those proposed to a Catholic either by his or her own bishop or by the bishop of Rome. Though not explicitly referenced in the text, Karl Rahner has insisted that this passage particularly concerns “grades of religious obedience in the realm of faith.”<sup>38</sup>

In his commentary on this section of *Lumen gentium*, Rahner noted that the formulations quoted above “are not intelligible *except* in the light of . . . [certain] problems” concerning “the teaching authority of the Church and the forms of obedience due to it.”<sup>39</sup> These problems, which he says must be borne in mind in considering the entire text of no. 25, include:

the distinctions to be made between the wielders of the teaching authority in the Church (individual bishops, the collective episcopate, the pope, a general council); the distinctions to be made between the doctrines taught (revealed truths, truths not revealed but necessarily linked with revelation as its presupposition or its consequence etc.); the distinctions to be made between the types of authority claimed by the teacher and his intention of binding his hearers; the distinctions to be made between the “theological qualifications” of the truths proposed (dogma, common teaching, irreformable truths, reformable truths which still demand a conditional assent etc.); the distinctions to be made in the assent of the hearer (from the absolute assent of faith to a genuine but not necessarily irreformable inner assent and on to mere “obedient silence”).<sup>40</sup>

Thus Rahner draws attention to the enormous complexity inherent in adequate interpretation of doctrinal statements. While that complexity is nowhere specified in the language of the documents, it is admitted of by the council’s formulations.

Note that even where the council is forced to address the question of doctrinal interpretation, as in *Lumen gentium* no. 25, it provides no explicit or detailed guidance. In the last sentence of the passage quoted above, the council recognizes that the assent required for specific teachings of the pope will legitimately vary according to his intention (*iuxta mentem et*

<sup>37</sup> *Lumen gentium* no. 25, emphasis mine.

<sup>38</sup> Karl Rahner, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: Chapter III, Articles 18–27,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* 1.209.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

*voluntatem manifestatam ipsius*). But with regard to the means of discerning that intention, the council only points to *some* of the principal norms that are appropriate (*quae se prodit praecipue*), and even those are named in the vaguest of terms. Clearly the council intends that the interpreter must necessarily turn elsewhere for more thorough and explicit guidance. Where else might they have presumed such guidance would be found, other than in the neo-Scholastic manuals that included a reliance on the detailed system of theological notes? As Rahner himself concludes: “Again we must refer the reader to the text-books of fundamental theology for a detailed discussion of the criteria of the various degrees of obligation corresponding to the exercise of the magisterium.”<sup>41</sup>

### RECOGNIZING VATICAN II AS A TRANSITIONAL EVENT

My personal conviction is that in order to understand fully the documents of the Second Vatican Council on this question, one must be attentive to the nature of the council as a *transitional event* in Catholic theology. It is certainly true that a decided majority of the bishops were convinced that neo-Scholastic theology had to give way to a more phenomenological approach in order to do justice to the council’s aims of pastoral renewal, ecumenical progress, and engaging the modern world. Nevertheless, that same majority was quite willing to continue to rely upon certain aspects of the neo-Scholastic method to give needed support to its very different theological articulations. Put another way, the overt rejection of neo-Scholasticism as the *formal paradigm* for the council’s theological reflections *need not imply that all aspects* of that system were intentionally discarded. More specifically, the council’s eschewal of the explicit language and terminology of the neo-Scholastic theological notes *need not imply a negative judgment* on the appropriateness of that method in the interpretation of doctrinal statements, including its own. Indeed, in the mind of one of its most eminent *periti*, Karl Rahner, the bishops clearly intended that the neo-Scholastic textbooks would be referred to for a detailed method in interpreting its formulations.

I have highlighted the words *need not imply* in this context because it is Rahner’s opinion that it is precisely this *unnecessary* implication that often has in fact been *actualized* in the period since Vatican II. The council has become so associated with its overturning of the neo-Scholastic monopoly on Catholic theology that those who did not experience the event tend to assume that the bishops moved entirely beyond neo-Scholasticism in one fell swoop. Perhaps some of those who did experience the event were justifiably so relieved to breathe “fresh air” at last, that they were loathe to

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 210.

consider the necessity of returning to any aspect of the neo-Scholastic textbooks for interpreting the council documents. *In medio virtus stat*, the expression goes, and a proper understanding of the conciliar teaching requires a more nuanced perspective on the *event* of the council. This is why Rahner's statement that the council represented a fundamental *transition* in Catholic theology, made in his famous "world-church" address and noted at the beginning of my article, is such a useful corrective. A transition is a crossing over, something caught *in between* what was earlier and what was later, and containing aspects of both.

Hermann Pottmeyer has drawn attention to the errors incumbent on approaches to the documents of Vatican II that engage in selective interpretation, without the requisite regard for the council's historical context and the transitional character that resulted from its effort to achieve consensus between a progressive majority and a conservative minority. Writing 20 years after the close of the council, Pottmeyer calls for an end to such selective interpretations: "An appropriate hermeneutic requires, therefore, that the texts be interpreted in the light of the evolution both of the council and its texts, and of the tendency manifested therein. . . . we must take into account the council's will to continuity as well as its move in a new direction."<sup>42</sup> The council's teaching regarding the doctrinal authority of specific propositions can only be understood in light of such a "will to continuity," that of a continued reliance upon the accepted modes of doctrinal qualification comprised by the neo-Scholastic theological notes. Reading *Lumen gentium* in this light is one example of what Pottmeyer calls "a hermeneutic that does justice to the character of Vatican II as a transitional council."<sup>43</sup>

#### THE CONTINUING NEED FOR DOCTRINAL QUALIFICATION

The tendency to give insufficient attention to the transitional nature of the council's treatment of doctrinal interpretation is lamentable because it can lead to a virtual vacuum in the Church's ability to order theological propositions according to their formal authority. If one does not read the formulations of no. 25 and the *Notificationes* of *Lumen gentium* as gesturing toward the established method of the theological notes, one is left only with instructions so general and vague of themselves as to be practically useless. The result is that interpreters of doctrine lose the ability to discriminate sufficiently among propositions, and the theoretically many gra-

<sup>42</sup> Hermann Pottmeyer, "A New Phase in the Reception of Vatican II: Twenty Years of Interpretation of the Council," in *The Reception of Vatican II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, Jean-Pierre Jossua, and Joseph A. Komonchak (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1987) 40.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 43

dations of doctrinal authority collapse to a “zero-one” dichotomy. A doctrine is either fully binding or not at all, requires either absolute assent or none at all, is either defined dogma or mere opinion, has either been authoritatively pronounced by the magisterium or has not. The interpretive sophistication provided by a system of theological notes, as Ratzinger suggested in his commentary on the *Notificationes*, allows one to chart a path between these two unpalatable extremes.

Certainly the issues addressed by the theological notes are of perennial concern in theology. Rahner regarded the need for some method of theological qualification as permanently necessitated by the “complexity attendant on faith” which “results from the nature of human knowledge and from the historical nature of revelation and tradition.”<sup>44</sup> The International Theological Commission, in a document issued nearly a quarter century after Vatican II, makes the following statement: “The living character of tradition gives rise to a great variety of doctrinal statements, differing in import and degree of binding force. In order to assess and interpret them properly, theology has developed its teaching with regard to theological notes; this was derived in part from the church’s magisterium. Unfortunately, it has fallen somewhat into desuetude in recent times. Nevertheless, it is useful for the interpretation of dogma and should therefore be renewed and further developed.”<sup>45</sup>

The Commission goes on to quote the guidance provided in *Lumen gentium* no. 25 regarding the means of determining the authority of magisterial statements (cited here in this article in n. 37) and concludes: “The precise meaning of this conciliar statement *requires more thorough theological clarification*. It would be especially desirable that the church’s magisterium—in order not to expend its authority unnecessarily—indicate clearly in individual instances the varying forms and degrees of binding force of its pronouncements.”<sup>46</sup> Statements of this kind serve as further support for my conclusion that a reading of *Lumen gentium* no. 25 not seen as gesturing toward the established neo-Scholastic theological notes leaves the reader (even a member of the International Theological Commission) with insufficient clarity regarding an appropriate method of doctrinal interpretation. Recognizing Vatican II as a transitional event incorporating traditional methods into new modes of theological articulation allows for a more fruitful reading of these passages, one that allows for the pastoral interests of the council without sacrificing the “conceptual exactitude” required in theological interpretation.

<sup>44</sup> Rahner, *Commentary* 1.209.

<sup>45</sup> International Theological Commission, “On the Interpretation of Dogmas,” *Origins* 20 (May 17, 1990) 1–14, at 7.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

“As a historical religion,” writes Francis Sullivan, “Christianity relies heavily on written documents from the past: on sacred scripture, the writings of church fathers, liturgical texts, and documents produced by councils and popes.”<sup>47</sup> This reliance on tradition gives theology its essentially hermeneutical character, and establishes a permanent value for methods of doctrinal qualification such as the theological notes. The Second Vatican Council has been characterized as “ ‘pastoral’ in its fusion of truth and love, ‘doctrine’ and pastoral solicitude: it wished to reach beyond the dichotomy between pragmatism and doctrinalism, back to the biblical unity in which practice and doctrine are one, a unity grounded in Christ, who is both the *Logos* and the Shepherd. . . .”<sup>48</sup> An interpretation of the council as a transitional event allows for the theological notes to serve as an apt tool in precisely this fusion of truth and love, oriented toward the charitable qualification of doctrinal statements such that Catholic truth leaves the maximum room for individual freedom. John Henry Newman had this dual function in mind in his famous statement on the role of the theologian:

so difficult a virtue is faith, even with the special grace of God, in proportion as the reason is exercised, so difficult is it to assent inwardly to propositions, verified to us neither by reason nor experience, but depending for their reception on the word of the Church as God’s oracle, that she has ever shown the utmost care *to contract, as far as possible, the range of truths and the sense of propositions, of which she demands this absolute reception. . . .* To cooperate in this *charitable duty* has been one special work of her theologians, and *rules are laid down by herself, by tradition, and by custom, to assist them in the task.*<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Francis A. Sullivan, *Creative Fidelity: Weighing and Interpreting Documents of the Magisterium* (New York: Paulist, 1996) 109. Sullivan, as this book amply illustrates, has long been profitably engaged in the project of developing and disseminating a method of doctrinal interpretation that captures the abiding value of the theological notes while being more suitable to contemporary theological articulations. See also his *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist, 1983).

<sup>48</sup> Ratzinger, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” 299.

<sup>49</sup> John Henry Newman, *Letter Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk on the Occasion of Mr. Gladstone’s Recent Expostulation* (London: B.M. Pickering, 1875) 111, emphasis mine.