

BOOK REVIEWS

GHISLAIN LAFONT AND THE CONTINUING QUEST FOR AN ADEQUATE ECCLESIOLOGY (A Review Article in Commemoration of Vatican II's 50th Anniversary)

L'ÉGLISE EN TRAVAIL DE RÉFORME. By Ghislain Lafont. Paris: Cerf, 2011. Pp. vii + 342. €25.

Since the appearance of his influential and widely read *Imaginer l'Église catholique* in 1995 (ET, *Imagining the Catholic Church*, 2000), Lafont has continued to address ecclesiological issues in articles, talks, and contributions to symposia. In this book he has assembled some of these in what he calls his second volume of *Imaginer l'Église Catholique*. Except for an article on the papacy, all were previously published. L., a French Benedictine who taught for many years at the Ateneo Sant'Anselmo and the Gregorian University in Rome, joins a growing chorus of commentators on the hermeneutics of Vatican II. He holds that something new happened at Vatican II *and* that the council called for reform. The two options of change and reform-in-continuity are not mutually exclusive alternatives for interpreting the council. In this book, too, L. again demonstrates his courage and optimism in addressing urgent and sensitive matters in the Catholic Church and between the churches.

The book consists of 15 chapters, grouped into four parts: "Hermeneutical Considerations" (chaps. 1–5), "Holiness, the Central Axis of Vatican II" (chaps. 6–8), "Elements Constituting an Immediate History" (chaps. 9–13), and "Dreaming the Church" (chaps. 14–15). Some of L.'s ideas will be familiar to those who have read his earlier works, but the real contribution of his new work is the conceptual framework within which he offers his observations and challenges. It represents an advance on his earlier attempts.

L. proposes that we envision Vatican II as initiating a new phase of the church's recent history. To this end, he distinguishes between two different goals of the Council of Trent: (1) the effort at countering the Reformation, and (2) the more fundamental and embracive spirit of self-reform to which Trent called the 16th-century church. While pursuing the former goal, the church was often condemnatory, polemical, defensive, and outward-looking; and while pursuing the latter goal, the church was inward-looking and primarily challenged only individual members of the church to conversion. However, it also challenged the hierarchical church to institutional reform. Unfortunately, most of the church's energies after

Trent were spent in opposing one movement after another: the reform called for by Protestants, the new physical sciences, Enlightenment thinkers, liberal political theory, and modernity. Vatican II, then, is in continuity with Trent inasmuch as it has called the church back to the neglected dimension of self-reform originally advocated by Trent. In this respect L. sees Pope John XXIII as representing the call to self-reform of the church by positively engaging the world. The minority bishops at the council and Pope John's successors have not caught his spirit but instead represent a reversion to a Counter-Reformation mentality and thereby impede the accomplishment of Vatican II's aims.

Another of L.'s overarching ideas is that Vatican II privileged love over knowledge—or as L. puts it, “hearing” over “seeing”—in teaching about the nature of revelation. For most of its existence Catholicism has fiercely defended the exclusive primacy of truth by rejecting any right of error to exist. This has made for a strong teaching authority in the church and for the clarity of the church's teaching, but the emphasis on truth has been at the expense of tolerating differing views. That the church has pursued error and even minor deviations so vigorously, sometimes to the point of persecuting her own members, has resulted in many a sad chapter in the church's dealings with nonbelievers and dissenters. In consequence, the postconciliar church has felt the need to ask for forgiveness of various groups of persecuted persons. According to L., Vatican II tried to reorient the church toward the attractive power of love, and here too he sees John XXIII as embodying a particular “charism of love” and attempting to inculcate the spirit of love in the church.

The notions of relationality, pluralism, and dialogue occur frequently throughout the essays and constitute a kind of triad of basic convictions that have emerged in recent historical consciousness. Modernity and postmodernity, with their different ways of arriving at truth, meaning, purpose, and value, account for these basic ideas and help explain why such issues as the diversity of world religions, the ineradicable pluralism of different anthropologies and cosmologies, and the necessity of ecumenism among Christian churches are unavoidable and offer new opportunities for mutual understanding and cooperation in the human family. Instead of seeing these changed conditions as threats, modern men and women tend to see them in positive terms.

A theme particularly important to L. is holiness. No council before Vatican II had focused its attention so resolutely on this note of the church. However, the council did not think through its teaching on holiness, because it was so rushed to complete its business and especially to dispatch a final version of *Lumen gentium* (LG), the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. If it had taken more time, or at least encouraged deeper theological reflection, the council would have taught more clearly about the basic nature of the

relationship of believers in the people of God. Instead of defining the laity negatively as not belonging to the ordained hierarchy or to the state of consecrated religious life in the church (*LG* no. 31), it could have used its profound insight into the universal call to holiness (*LG* no. 39) as the basis of a true reflection on the constitution of the people of God. In L.'s understanding, the basic distinction in the church is between the laity and vowed religious. All are called to holiness, but each state in its own distinct, but not mutually exclusive, way: the laity by engaging the world, religious by accepting and living out celibacy (religious). According to this way of looking at the basic constitution of the church, those in holy orders are chosen from the ranks of the laity and religious to exercise the apostolic mission of leadership and supervision among the people of God. As such, the ordained are free to be either single, or married, or celibate by vow. L. points out in passing that it is more proper theologically to speak of the "apostolic dimension of the constitution of the church" rather than of the "hierarchical constitution of the church" *tout court*.

Vatican II has left us the task of continuing to rethink the basic structure of the church, but not without also bequeathing us the rich resources of its conciliar teachings. In handing on to us the basic teaching of the call of all to holiness, the council has relayed the task of continued reflection on the nature of the church. In pursuance of this goal, L. proposes a thought experiment that would have us read the chapters of *Lumen gentium* not in their original ordering but in the following order: The Mystery of the Church, The People of God, The Call to Holiness, The Laity, Religious, The Hierarchy, and finally The Pilgrim Church. Reordering the chapters in this way emphasizes the council's teaching on the centrality of the universal call to holiness and the changed inner-ecclesial relationships that emerge from this perspective.

In the course of the past 50 years we have learned not only that the teachings of a council need to be understood and received, but also that every council unleashes a postconciliar phase that involves a process of varying time-spans during which these teachings might demand amplification, reconfiguration, and reordering. In L.'s mind this process is precisely what needs to be acknowledged and purposely engaged in regarding the status of laity in the church and the ecclesiology that flows from such amplification, reconfiguration, and reordering. Without this process the church will be unable to address the neuralgic and vexing issues that continue to bedevil her: the nature of ministry, the extent of the *sensus fidelium*, the role of women in church and society, the relation of the secular and the sacred, the true nature of the role and extent of the authority of the ordained hierarchy, and the place of celibacy in the church, among others. We will never be able to address these issues without properly situating them in terms of an ecclesiology that has more secure, yet flexible, foundations.

Is there any wonder, then, that the postconciliar church is experiencing such difficulty in appropriating Vatican II and living it out in all its consequences? Vatican II was not just “another council” among many, but a council that has called for radical reorientation in the church. This cannot be accomplished overnight, nor can it be implemented without the pain of experiencing deep differences among the members of the church. What a council does not address, or addresses poorly, ineluctably becomes the task of future theological efforts and eventually, perhaps, of another council. We have seen this before in the history of councils: Constantinople completing Nicaea with its teaching on the Holy Spirit, Chalcedon adding balance to Ephesus’s Christology, Constantinople III further amplifying the Christology of both Ephesus and Chalcedon, and finally Vatican II addressing the office of bishop and thus correcting an ecclesiological imbalance left by Vatican I.

The first 50 years after Vatican II are the down payment for many more years of self-reform and struggle ahead. That is why L. speaks so often and so eloquently of the centrality of hope in the postconciliar period. Many will read the signs of division in the church as indications of the final testing of the church under the onslaughts of modernity and post-modernity; and many will even accuse the church of failing catastrophically and forecast its imminent demise. L., however, is not among them. His view is that the church, fortified with the primacy of love and the theological virtue of hope, can courageously enter a period of new vitality on behalf of the gospel and a newfound spirit of service to humankind. In spite of his criticism of much in today’s church, L. is a person of Christian optimism who calls us to join him on the journey. In this sometimes-divisive phase of the postconciliar church’s search for the significance and meaning of Vatican II, L. once again challenges us to engage our theological imagination and not just our theological reason in the task of “dreaming the church” for which we yearn into existence. With the appearance of *L’Église en travail de réforme*, L. once again has shown himself to be among the most important ecclesialogists of our time.

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FIRST CORINTHIANS. By PHEME PERKINS. Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012. Pp. xiv + 238. \$27.99.

Commentaries are notoriously difficult to review; they are probably best used when one wants to think about a particular portion of a text, rather than read the whole document straight through at a sitting. They can, moreover, tend toward the radically unreadable. Here, however, we have a model of the genre. This is partly because of the freshness of so