

Hierarchy or Social Network? Spirit and Method at Vatican II

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Today's liturgical progressives may claim the 'Sprit of Vatican II,' but it is the conservative faction that has used the 'Methods of Vatican II' to influence the Church's direction.

The Church may be more than a merely human organization, but it is no less. Christians believe that God makes his will known through very human processes: cardinals debating the election of a Pope, a parish finance committee discussing the annual budget, a bishop's conference, an ecumenical council.

At Vatican II, a group of progressive bishops had huge influence on the Council as a whole, overcoming opposition from highly placed conservative bishops. The progressives accomplished this, according to sociologist Melissa Wilde, by approaches that resemble 'social media,' even though the relevant technologies weren't available at the time.

Wilde has not applied her analytic tools to today's Church, but, following her logic, I believe that the shoe is now firmly on the other foot. It is the conservatives who are using the very methods that Wilde saw at work in the Council. This, I think, has serious implications for both progressives and conservative Catholics. Before developing these, I want to summarize part of Wilde's analysis.

Wilde, a sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania, looks at the Second Vatican Council through a sociological lens; for the most part, she stands back from questions of theology or from the rightness or wrongness of the changes that took place at Vatican II. She has published a number of articles as well as a book: *Vatican II: A Sociological Analysis of Religious Change* (Princeton, 2007).

Wilde gained access to a large corpus of archives and sources, including records of individual bishops' votes, transcripts of interviews from the early 1960s, correspondence between groups of bishops and minutes of meetings of both 'progressive' and 'conservative' groups at the Council. She uses these to analyze important documents and themes of the Council, including religious freedom (*Dignitatis humanae*), the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, sources of revelation and ecumenism. And, she develops a number of interesting theories about how the Church did or did not change in the course of Vatican II.

The aspect of the book I want to dwell on in this note concerns the different approaches to communication that progressive and conservative factions took in the course of the Council. As Wilde says,

... a great deal of the Council's progressive outcome can be explained by a relatively simple sociological fact: because progressives built a far more extensive and flexible organization than their conservative counterparts, they were more successful at

developing compromise positions that the vast majority of bishops could support. These organizational differences derived from different cultural understandings of the nature of authority in the Roman Catholic Church. Progressives believed in the doctrine of “collegiality,” which, in essence, stated that the bishops, when convened as a council, are as infallible as the pope – a doctrine that conservatives saw as threatening his authority and primacy. Consequently, while progressives built a highly effective, consensus-based organization as soon as the Council began, conservatives were much slower to mobilize, and when they did so, formed a hierarchical organization which never developed into much more than a letter-writing campaign to the pope. (Wilde, 2007, p. 57)

The two groups in question were not official but were built by highly engaged bishops. The progressive one became called *Domus Mariae* (DM), after a hotel in which they met; the conservative group became known as CIP, for *Coetus Internationalis Patrum*. DM had roughly 20 bishops, CIP between 10 and 16.

Wilde quotes a study of the farm workers’ movement that lists attributes that increase a group’s ‘strategic capacity,’ or ability to impact a large number of people. Strategic capacity is greater when

- a leadership group includes ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’;
- the network that comprises the group contains both strong and weak ties (i.e. ‘tight’ and ‘loose’ social connections);
- the group uses a variety of modes of collective action;
- the organization conducts regular and open deliberation, draws resources from multiple constituencies, and gives those constituencies real accountability – in other words, its communications are two-way rather than ‘broadcast.’

She argues that DM (the progressives) possessed virtually all of these attributes, and CIP (the conservatives), none of them. DM, for example, conducted meetings with very open agendas. They made extensive use of episcopal conferences, a move that vastly increased the number of bishops they were able to contact. The exhibit in the Appendix shows their overall organizational structure, a model that enabled them to communicate with 1900 bishops each week. The communication was two-way throughout the Council: conferences could gather suggestions about tasks to be accomplished, and where DM leaders could enact ‘a consensus-based form of participatory democracy.’ Wilde describes the DM:

More than simply a voting machine or political mobilizing structure (though these functions should not be discounted), the DM was, in effect, a school where bishops went to learn about issues and returned to their episcopates with greater knowledge and understanding than they had before, and thus an even deeper belief in collegiality. (p. 68)

Even without the tools of today's Internet, the progressives acted like proto-bloggers. A documentation centre provided weekly documents as well as 'urgent' updates in a subscriber's choice of six languages. It taped lectures by prominent theologians (Congar, Laurentin, Schillebeeckx etc.) and made them available.

In contrast, the conservative group started with substantial resources and direct access to the Roman Curia and the pope; given the overwhelmingly conservative nature of the preparatory documents developed by the Curia, bishops like Marcel Lefebvre, Luigi Carli and Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviani were confident that little would change during the debates. Hence CIP communications were both limited (they tended to focus on known conservative bishops) and one-way. "Thus, the CIP apparently failed not because their opinions were so out of line with the rest of the episcopate but because they did not mobilize all of their supporters." (p. 77).

Consider today's liturgical conservatives ('traditionalists') and progressives ('liberals'). I don't have the kind of data that Wilde used, but I would propose that it is the liturgical conservatives, not the progressives, who are using the methods and tools that she described in her analysis of Vatican II. The liturgical conservative movement ticks most of the boxes sketched above: insiders and outsiders (perhaps even the ultimate insider, Pope Benedict); strong and weak ties; different modes of collective action. Because it relies heavily on bloggers and their commenting constituents, it is necessarily two-way. The 'surface area' of its network is far greater than that of the progressives.

Today's progressives resemble the Curial conservative group in the 1960s, but instead of relying on access to the pope, progressives have relied on access to the academy. Communications from many conservative writers seemed so out of line with scholarly views on scripture, liturgy and theology that they were easy to dismiss, even as new blogs opened almost daily, connecting to one another and creating a self-reinforcing network of opinion. One blogger enthusiastically quotes another; a blog quote is picked up in a book; a bishop cites the book in an important speech. The conservative network mobilizes quickly, whether to flood a poll in the mainstream media, to report a liturgical anomaly, or to organize letter-writing campaigns to the Vatican.

Progressives, on the other hand, have been slower to use social media. There are admirable forays in this direction – the work of Jesuit Media Initiatives, for example. Some of these are interactive, but many are one-way, 'broadcast' methods. Conservative themes – 'hermeneutic of continuity,' for instance – pop up everywhere.

What implications could this sketchy analysis have, if it proved true? Here are five. Taken as a whole they apply to conservatives and progressives alike.

1. **We should be slow to declare the end of history.** There was a tendency after Vatican II to declare the triumph of the progressive movement, as though the superior communication skills of the Domus Mariae group proved the truth of their message. Today there some assume that the prevalence of conservative liturgical thought means that the Church is on a firm and final path to a new conservative consensus. But, to adapt an aphorism of Etienne Gilson's, history always buries its undertakers. I don't for a moment believe that the story is over, any more than it was over at the end of the Council.

2. **Progressives should stop relying so heavily on academic validation of their views.** It is easy to say that a large part of conservative communication, whether on blogs, books or video lectures, has not undergone the scrutiny of peer review and verification through primary sources. But scholars have shown their tendency toward trend-following and intellectual fads, and a few conservatives are no mean scholars themselves. There has been a general blurring of the line between popular writing and serious academic work: Pope Benedict's book *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, for instance, never claims to be a book of scholarship or research, but it is widely interpreted that way. Academic validation is useful, perhaps necessary. But it is not sufficient to create widespread consensus. It is not enough to say that such and such an article was approved by the anonymous peer reviewers for *Worship*; what bishops are citing it in their speeches? Are its concepts getting picked up by journalists and bloggers? What impact is it having?
3. **Everyone should try for more clarity about the facts.** Gratuitous assertions abound in the area of liturgy. Some blogs cheerfully admit that they are posting rumor and things that 'so-and-so might have said'; more often things are proclaimed as solid fact that are, at best, second-hand reports. As Daniel Patrick Moynihan (supposedly) said, we are each entitled to our own opinions, but not to our own facts. Both conservatives and progressives could improve here.
4. **Progressives should master not only the new media but also the art of developing more effective networks.** If Wilde's analysis is right, progressives did just this during Vatican II. I see no reason why they can't do it again. At conferences and lectures I have attended, scholars have bemoaned the rise of often ill-informed conservative views and frameworks. There is much shaking of heads and general agreement that things are looking bad, but there are few proposals for action. Progressive views are too often published in obscure places. Some of the best collections of articles – *Worship* magazine, for instance – aren't available electronically except through expensive academic databases. Important speeches – I think of John O'Malley's recent talks at Vanderbilt – don't get much mention in blogs. In contrast, let a conservative cardinal like Burke or Ranjith give a talk, and the conservative social media is all atwitter.
5. **Conservative leaders should take responsibility for their followers' outrageous pronouncements.** The liturgical conservative movement was once a group of outsiders; today it may have the upper hand within the Church. With power comes responsibility. Some of the most heavily visited conservative blogs are marred with uncharitable and sometimes schismatic comments and postings. Moderators who swiftly delete the lightest criticism of Pope Benedict look the other way while their commenters post vicious anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim comments.

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I think we are in a kind of springtime for the Church, not because conservative liturgical thinking is in the ascendant but because the potential for searching, widespread debate is very high. Newman wrote, toward the end of the *Apologia*, that

The energy of the human intellect “does from opposition grow;” it thrives and is joyous, with a tough elastic strength, under the terrible blows of the divinely-fashioned weapon, and is never so much itself as when it has lately been overthrown. ... It is the vast Catholic body itself, and it only, which affords an arena for both combatants in that awful, never-dying duel. It is necessary for the very life of religion, viewed in its large operations and its history, that the warfare should be incessantly carried on. ... As in a civil polity the State exists and endures by means of the rivalry and collision, the encroachments and defeats of its constituent parts, so in like manner Catholic Christendom is no simple exhibition of religious absolutism, but presents a continuous picture of Authority and Private Judgment alternately advancing and retreating as the ebb and flow of the tide;—it is a vast assemblage of human beings with wilful intellects and wild passions, brought together into one by the beauty and the majesty of a Superhuman Power—into what may be called a large reformatory or training-school, not as if into a hospital or into a prison, not in order to be sent to bed, not to be buried alive, but (if I may change my metaphor) brought together as if into some moral factory, for the melting, refining, and moulding, by an incessant noisy process of the raw material of human nature, so excellent, so dangerous, so capable of divine purposes.

The Internet, and blogs like *Pray Tell*, are fine enablers of this ‘incessant noisy process.’ A few straightforward moves on the part of both conservative and progressive writers on liturgy could make it work even better.

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