

Seeking to rescue the ‘hermeneutic of continuity’

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One of the very few areas where I agree with the Lefebvrists is their assertion that Pope Benedict’s ‘hermeneutic of continuity’ fails to make logical sense. A recent article in the journal *DICI* is fairly typical of their attacks on the concept. The hermeneutic of continuity, it says, is

... the principle of a “unitary interpretation”, according to which the documents of Vatican II and the preceding Magisterial documents ought to shed light on each other. The interpretation of the novelties taught by the Second Vatican Council must therefore reject, as Benedict XVI says, “the hermeneutic of discontinuity” with relation to Tradition, whereas it must affirm “the hermeneutic of reform, of renewal in continuity.” ...

If we speak about “continuity” or “rupture”, this should be understood, **in the traditional sense, to mean a continuity or rupture that is objective**, in other words, related to the object of the Church’s preaching. This is tantamount to speaking about the set of revealed truths, as the Magisterium of the Church preserves and presents them, giving them the same significance, without the possibility of a contradiction between present preaching and past preaching. Rupture would consist of attacking the immutable character of objective Tradition and would then be a synonym for logical contradiction between two statements, the respective meanings of which cannot both be true at the same time.

But it is necessary to admit the plain truth and to recognize that the word “continuity” does not have this traditional sense at all in the current discourse of ecclesiastics. **They speak precisely about continuity with regard to a subject that evolves over the course of time.** It is not a question of the continuity of an object, of the dogma or the doctrine that the Church’s Magisterium proposes today, giving it the same meaning as before. It is a question of the continuity of the unique subject “Church”.¹

In other words, the only thing that is ‘continuous’ is the group of people who are telling us how to think about the texts. The texts themselves are contradictory.

The Lefebvrists apply similar thinking to the texts of the Mass. The Tridentine Mass, they say, cannot possibly be continuous with the normative Mass because they reflect different theologies. ‘Two forms, one Latin rite’ really means (they would say) ‘two different Masses, under one pope.’ They level similar criticisms at the notion that Vatican II’s teachings on religious liberty can be viewed as continuous with earlier papal pronouncements.

¹ ‘Debate about Vatican II: Fr. Gleize responds to Msgr. Ocariz,’ *DICI*, 23 December 2011, <http://www.dici.org/en/news/debate-about-vatican-ii-fr-gleize-responds-to-msgr-ocariz>, retrieved 1 January 2012. Emphasis in original.

The 'hermeneutic of continuity' idea has attracted a substantial following, and not just among traditionalists. Given the importance that people attach to the concept, I felt it would be insufficient to reject it out of hand.

St. Ignatius of Loyola reminds us that

... every good Christian is to be more ready to save his neighbor's proposition than to condemn it. If he cannot save it, let him inquire how he means it; and if he means it badly, let him correct him with charity. If that is not enough, let him seek all the suitable means to bring him to mean it well, and save himself.²

In seeking to save the proposition of a hermeneutic of continuity, I thought of the mathematical concept of continuity. I am sufficiently rusty at mathematics that I sought the help of my oldest son, now studying pure maths at university. He knew he had to simplify the concept: 'Dad, the easiest way for you to think about it is that you can draw the graph of a continuous function without lifting your pencil from the paper. If the function isn't continuous, you can't.'

This sounded convincing to me but not very mathematical, so I pressed him for more detail. He sighed and tried to explain continuity to a non-mathematician.

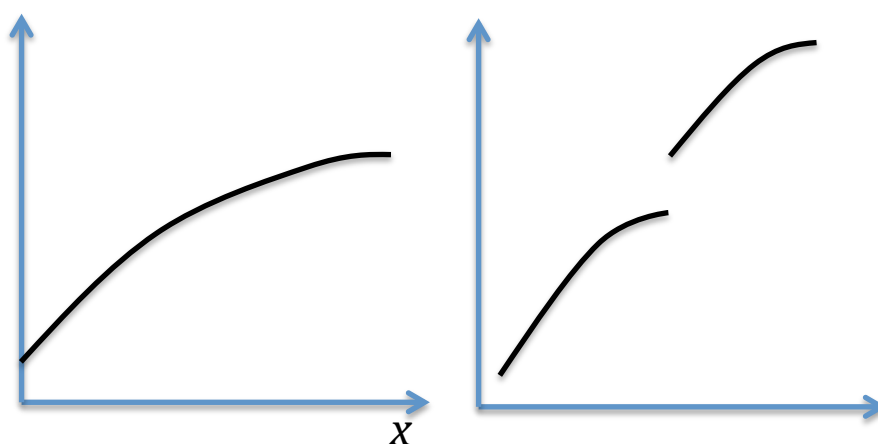
Think of a function as a graph that relates one thing to another, just as a graph in a newspaper might relate time (the x or horizontal axis) to world population (the y or vertical axis). For liturgical purposes we can think of the x axis as representing time and the y axis as a composite indicator of liturgical praxis – not just from 'high' to 'low' but the whole combination of languages, ritual styles, musical choices etc., collapsed onto a single axis.

Roughly speaking, mathematicians say that a function f is continuous if

$$\text{for every } a, \lim_{x \uparrow a} f(x) = \lim_{x \downarrow a} f(x).$$

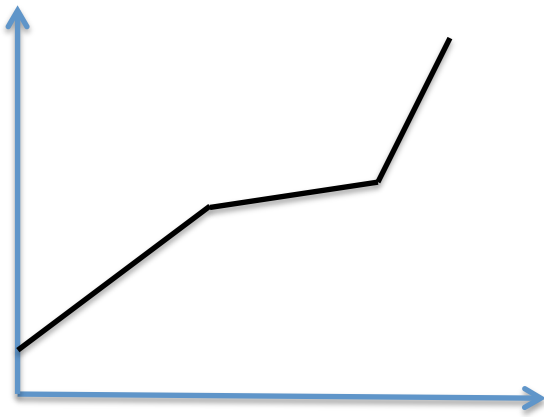
Another way to put this is that you can get as close as you wish to any point on the curve by approaching it either from one side or the other. Moving backward along the x axis works just as well as moving forward.

The function on the left is continuous within the domain shown. The one on the right is not. You cannot draw it without lifting the pencil.



² From the 'Presupposition' to the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Elder Mullan SJ, 1914

'Continuous' doesn't mean smooth. This function is also continuous:



The central idea here is that where there is continuity you can get arbitrarily close to any point on the graph, moving in either direction.

I doubt that Pope Benedict had a mathematical concept in mind when he spoke of 'a hermeneutic of discontinuity' but – supposing that he did – what would it mean for the liturgy? A liturgical application of the mathematical idea is that no *fundamental* change in the Mass took place. To believe that there is 'continuity' you have to believe that you can, without severely violating the rules of either Mass, make the old look like the new and vice versa.

To some extent I think this is true. Moving from the new Mass to the old (right to left on the x axis), you can celebrate in Latin with the priest largely facing away from the people. Communion in both kinds and extraordinary ministers of communion are optional in the normative rite. Some prayers can be added. The Roman Canon (Eucharistic Prayer I) can be used exclusively.

Conversely, you can move from left to right, from the Tridentine to the normative Mass, and I think that this is what Pope Pius XII and other preconciliar reformers were beginning to do when they introduced dialogue Mass and started to encourage the laity to follow the liturgical action. Under certain conditions (e.g. in St. Peter's in Rome) the Tridentine Mass can be celebrated facing the people. There were changes to the Latin texts, especially to the propers, but there have been constant changes to the Mass, over the years. The reformers after the Council of Trent slowed the changes (e.g. as with the second segment in the graph above), and those after the Second Vatican Council sped them up. But, you could argue, someone would recognise the action as the same Mass.

To test this idea, we would have to break down the y axis and examine a range of liturgical practices: can you get from one rite to the other 'without lifting the pencil from the paper'?

Ultimately, I think you can't. In particular, the role of the congregation seems to have gone through a discontinuity – a very positive one – with the post-conciliar reforms. With the Tridentine Mass a congregation was not only entirely optional, even for a very solemn Mass, but largely irrelevant to what priest and servers were doing in the sanctuary. Now, the normative Mass provides an explicit and important role for the people. I find it striking that some traditionalists advocate

the return of multiple private Masses celebrated simultaneously at side altars within a single church. This introduces a 'discontinuity' in the wrong direction.

To argue the case for liturgical continuity, you would point to the new rite making provisions for private Masses (*missa sine populo*) and papal documents such as *Tra le sollecitudini* (1903) that praised 'the active participation in the most holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church;' other documents encouraged congregational attendance at Mass and frequent reception of communion. But you would have to overlook many things that seem discontinuous.

Largely for this reason, I think the Lefebvrists are still right: things really did change during the course of the 20th century, and you do have to lift the pencil from the paper, leaving some things behind as you move from the old to the new Mass. Many of these discontinuities are good. I hope that even the most dogged of traditionalists are happy to see the removal of the admonition to Jewish converts at the rite of baptism: *Horresce Judaicam perfidiam, respue Hebraicam superstitionem*. This means "Recoil in horror before Jewish treachery; reject (spit out) Hebrew superstition."³

Pope John XXIII eliminated this repulsive phrase, lifting his pencil from the paper to do so. We do well to follow his example.

I conclude, like the Lefebvrists, that there have been significant discontinuities. Unlike them, I see the discontinuities as positive. Also unlike them, I think that many aspects of the liturgy have been maintained in continuity. Depending on what you include in the y axis, it may be possible to draw the curve without lifting the pencil.

To Pope Benedict's credit, his first formulation of the concept was of 'reform in continuity,' suggesting that some discontinuities might be valuable. He also used the double-negative framing: rejecting the 'hermeneutic of rupture' rather than asserting the 'hermeneutic of continuity.' In mathematical terms, I suppose we could say that a 'rupture' exists where, no matter what you include on the y axis, a discontinuity will be introduced. Non-rupture is therefore a weaker condition than continuity.

But, apart from the Lefebvrists, I hear few people claiming that the new Mass, even when celebrated with clowns and tambourines, represents a complete break from the old.

I can understand a *preference* for continuity. But a *hermeneutic* of continuity would have to show which liturgical developments (including potential discontinuities) are desirable and which are not. That is why I think it ultimately fails as a concept. But there is much in the idea that can be rescued, and I hope that this note has been a useful start in that direction.

³ For more on this theme, see Rita Ferrone, "Anti-Jewish Elements in the Extraordinary Form," *Worship* vol. 84, no. 6 (November 2010), 498-513.