

*Orientalium Ecclesiarum* as Proof and  
Itinerary of the Hermeneutic of Reform:  
*Theoria* and a Little *Praxis*

Andrew Summerson

---

***Introduction: Reading Problems***

In the second century, St. Irenaeus accused the Valentians of “weaving ropes of sand” with the Scriptures. They were said to patch together “old wives’ fables, and then endeavor, by violently drawing away from their proper connection, words, expressions, and parables whenever found, to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions.”<sup>1</sup> There is something instructive about ancient debates in Christian scriptural hermeneutics. They were not fought on the level of pure ideas, but on the level of the text, that is, who read the text correctly or not.

This principally textual emphasis of the early Church comes to bear on current debates surrounding the interpretation of the Second Vatican Council in just over fifty years after the historic event. The first notable push toward the textual that we see is the final report of the 1985 extraordinary synod of bishops devoted to the interpretation of the council. It called for “a deeper reception” of the council that included not just a partial, but a full reading of texts.<sup>2</sup>

Emeritus bishop of Rome Benedict XVI, in a now-famous 2005 address to the Roman Curia, identified two hermeneutics at play in post-conciliar years – the hermeneutic of rupture and

---

<sup>1</sup> *Adversus Haereses* 1.8.1.

<sup>2</sup> See especially paragraphs 4 and 5.

the hermeneutic of reform. For Benedict, the difference between the two is primarily textual. The principle fault of the hermeneutic of rupture is a certain suspicion towards the actual text of the conciliar documents.<sup>3</sup> Viewed as compromised texts that had to accommodate various viewpoints of the council fathers, the conciliar documents are to be minimized. Hence, for the hermeneutic of rupture, “it would be necessary not to follow the texts of the Council but its spirit.”<sup>4</sup> Benedict’s alternative, the “hermeneutic of reform,” can only be grasped with the exacting task of reading, particularly the conciliar texts, where Benedict argues the council’s bold new thinking “is roughly traced.”<sup>5</sup> It is these documents that determine the essential post-conciliar direction. Whether one agrees with Benedict’s binomy or not,<sup>6</sup> it seems obvious that the *texts* are at the heart of the matter and any attempt to determine the “spirit of Vatican II” will need to make recourse to them.

To this end, I offer a reading exercise. I propose that *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (henceforth *OE*) offers a lesson in hermeneutics for the interpretation of the council as well as an itinerary for the council’s implementation. There is some audacity to this claim, and to this end, I would like to anticipate some objections. First, what does a small and forgotten decree have to offer that the more authoritative dogmatic constitutions do not?<sup>7</sup> Second, what does a document primarily directed at

---

<sup>3</sup> “[The hermeneutic of rupture] it claims that they are a result of the compromises, in which, to reach unanimity, it was found necessary to keep and reconfirm many old things that are now pointless. However, the true spirit of the Council is not to be found in these compromises, but instead the impulses toward the new that are contained in the texts.” See next footnote for reference.

<sup>4</sup> “Address of his Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia Offering them His Christmas Greetings. Thursday 22 December 2005,” available at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf\\_ben\\_xvi\\_spe\\_20051222\\_roman-curia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia_en.html).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> For a plea for nuance regarding this binomy, see J. Komonchak, “Benedict XVI and the Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 28 (2007): 323–337.

<sup>7</sup> In 1985 at the extraordinary synod, it was upheld that the dogmatic constitutions are to be the interpretive guideposts for the council documents.

less than five percent of Catholics have to say to the entire Catholic Church?

Let us attend to the first objection. *OE*'s size and stature work in its favor. Even in its economy of words, *OE* establishes the major points that run through the rest of the council documents, and the former's brevity is useful in working through the latter's prolixity. Furthermore, given that *OE* moved through the nave of St. Peter's with little difficulty in the revision and voting process,<sup>8</sup> *OE* represents *in grosso modo* what the council fathers agreed upon. Hence, we can handle *OE*'s cool presentation of key conciliar themes more easily than a document such as *Lumen Gentium*, still hot both from the welding of different perspectives in conflict at the council, as well as from continued debates about its interpretation.

With regard to the second objection, what does *OE* have to say to the entire Catholic Church? *OE* makes explicit overtures to assert the equality of Eastern Catholics in respect to the rest of the Catholic communion. This equality extends to the obligation to "preach the gospel to the whole world" (*OE* 3; cf. Mk 16:15). If the scope of the council is to provide "the broad new thinking ... to present to our world the requirement of the Gospel in its full greatness and purity,"<sup>9</sup> then the itinerary for effectively doing so should have similarities between the Eastern and Western Catholic Churches. Hence, Eastern Catholics, few though we may be, can provide in a microcosmic way what one hopes to see on a macro level in the wider Catholic communion.

I will divide my work into two sections: *theoria* and *praxis*. I will first look at *OE* and highlight the elements featured in the document that typify Vatican II's main concerns. They are: 1) a commitment to *ressourcement*; 2) an ecumenical sensibility; and 3) a critical engagement with the world. For reasons of time, I will focus principally on the first, as it is the most prevalent and it is the ground upon which the latter two are based. I want to specify the "content" that is to be retrieved is a specifically theological content and not just a

---

<sup>8</sup> As evidenced in J. O'Malley, *What Really Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008), 232.

<sup>9</sup> "Address of his Holiness..."