

local level can be a key indicator of, as well as a profound influence on, the condition of the larger society. Within the church, the local community unites the ideas of church, eucharist, and incarnation. The community constantly struggles to maintain "a meaningful relationship between its own smallness and sinfulness" on the one hand, and "the cosmic breadth of the Christian vision" on the other. Therefore, the local community is where "the People of God encounter their ongoing need for reconciliation." It thus exercises a certain *de facto* authority within the church. As Rahner and others have stated, the local community, gathered in the Eucharist, is the *event* of the universal church.

The scandals demonstrate the danger of failing to make the ministry of reconciliation tangible within local communities. Yet the community itself can become a faction, celebrating Eucharist as a nostalgic barrier against change, or as a tool of short-term political activism. "Such approaches arise from existing social divisions, and are dead ends with regard to the church's pilgrimage toward universal reconciliation, because they refuse to dwell *within* the tensions that make a truly inclusive Eucharist the astounding sacramental sign that it is." Insofar as it has avoided these temptations, while still seeking to enliven the exercise of the local community's proper authority, the lay group "The Voice of the Faithful" may be a useful reminder of the Eucharistic community's ministry of reconciliation.

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THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

Topic: Hermeneutics, History, and Doctrine
 Convener: James Le Grys, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
 Moderator: James Buckley, Loyola College in Maryland
 Presenter: Thomas Guarino, Seton Hall University
 Respondent: Anthony Godzieba, Villanova University

This session offered a discussion of the contemporary search for a hermeneutics appropriate for theology. The focus was on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, with attention given as well to the response of Emilio Betti.

In his paper, "Historicity and Truth: Gadamer and the Search for a Hermeneutics of Doctrine," Thomas Guarino began by noting that many significant Catholic documents hold that certain doctrines are universally and perduringly true, continuously normative throughout varying cultures and differing epochs. He contended that such doctrines require a hermeneutical theory congruent with this assertion. He argued, furthermore, that the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, while contributing much to contemporary interpretative theory, can only be appropriated in a qualified way by Christian theology. The reason for such quali-

fication is that Gadamer's philosophy cannot sustain the material continuity of fundamental Christian claims. The reason it cannot do so is because of Gadamer's reliance on Heidegger's thought with its eschewal of metaphysics (excluding, of course, his own "fundamental ontology") and its marked emphasis on the historicity of thought and being.

It was Guarino's contention that Gadamer's *ontological* convictions necessarily guide his *hermeneutical* ones. And there's the rub. Gadamer does not think that Christians of the fourth century (Nicene Creed), for example, and Christians of the twenty-first century affirm the same material *content*. Rather, Christians of all centuries continue interpreting the same texts that, in their polyvalent and historical character, open themselves to a wide plurality of readings. Texts themselves may be interpreted quite differently inasmuch as a determinate meaning is not the ultimate standard of interpretative adequacy. Of course, validity in interpretation is a notoriously slippery point in Gadamer, again calling into question his theological appositeness.

A hermeneutical theory that is more clearly consonant with Christian faith and doctrine is the one proffered by Emilio Betti. Like Gadamer, Betti holds that understanding is always already interpretation. Betti, however, accents the recovery of stable textual intention and the possibility of its contemporary actualization. Guarino argued that what separates Betti and Gadamer is that the former assumes a metaphysical "foundation," an eidetically discernible human nature, which Gadamer eschews.

In his response, Godzieba defended the use of Gadamer's hermeneutics in Catholic theological method. First, he severely questioned Guarino's depiction of Heidegger, Gadamer, et al. as "relativists." Guarino's argument suffers, in Godzieba's view, from a "Cartesian anxiety" (i.e., there can be only objectivism or complete relativism) and a defensiveness with regard to history that is inappropriate to the hermeneutics of doctrine. Next, Godzieba summarized the main lines of Gadamer's hermeneutics, emphasizing the continuities between past and present articulated by classics and by the tradition ("the history of effects"), as well as his recognition of the "otherness" of the other and the distinction between meaning and significance. Finally, Godzieba argued that Gadamer gives a better account than does Betti of historically unfolding tradition as a locus of revelational truth, thus making Gadamer's hermeneutics one of the most adequate for articulating the incarnational and sacramental imagination at the heart of Catholic theology.

An engaging discussion followed.

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