

SELECTED SESSIONS

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

- Topic: The Role of the Church in Reading the Signs of the Times
Convener: Thomas Kopfensteiner, Fordham University
Presenter: Robert E. Lampert, CHRISTUS Health
Respondent: Christophe Potworowski, Newman College, Edmonton, Alberta

Since the Second Vatican Council, the phrase, "reading the signs of the times in light of the Gospel" has been used in a variety of contexts. In many instances, the original meaning established in *Gaudium et Spes* has been lost, forgotten or misrepresented.

Robert E. Lampert set out to (1) clarify the understanding of the phrase as it emerged during the various preparatory texts of *Gaudium et Spes*, (2) highlight early postconciliar usage of the phrase, and (3) cite later developments in social teachings and assess their impact on the phrase's meaning.

Lampert analyzed the various preparatory texts of the conciliar document and found that what is called the "Zurich text," written in the Spring of 1964, was the first text that used the phrase, "reading the signs of the times." The criticism of the phrase led to the establishment of a Subcommittee to specify its meaning. The Subcommittee, *Signa Temporum*, had a number of principal contributors.

Among the contributors were Bishop Jacques Menager who emphasized that the Church was to be involved in the building of the world. The Church must discover the plan of God in the world so that it can assist more effectively in the development of that plan. "The Church looks toward the world and listens to it: it endeavors to perceive the signs of the times." Second, was Jean Danielou, S.J. who built upon the natural law tradition and its positive evaluation of earthly realities. He wrote that "God speaks through time. This is why the Church must listen to what the contemporary world says to it." Finally, there was Marie-Dominique Chenu, O.P. who used the phrase to capture the relationship between the Church and the world. For Chenu, the phrase built upon the unity of creation and redemption, created a congruence between Christian values and authentic human values, and effected a break from the overly abstract and static categories of thinkers such as Garrigou-Lagrange.

In the end, the Subcommittee wrote that "the signs of the times are the phenomena which, for their generality and their great frequency characterize an age. By them are affirmed the needs and aspirations of present humanity which are disposed to receive the action of the Church. The Church must observe them

and adapt its action to these signs. They manifest, in effect, the availability of grace and the aptitudes of today for listening to the Word of God."

The phrase, of course, is in a number of conciliar documents: *Gaudium et Spes*, 4, 11, 44; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 9; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 14; and *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4.

The category remained a continual theme of Pope Paul VI, particularly in *Octogesima Adveniens* which states that "two aspirations persistently make themselves felt in these new contexts, and they grow stronger to the extent that he becomes better informed and better educated: the aspiration to equality and the aspiration to participation, two forms of man's dignity and freedom" (23). His words commemorating 1975 as the United Nations International of the Woman ring even more prophetically today: "in the contemporary effort to promote the advancement of women in society, the Church has already recognized a sign of the times, and has seen in it a call of the Spirit."

Christophe Potworowski responded by focusing on the theology of Chenu, the theologian of the signs of the times. (See his *Contemplation and Incarnation. The Theology of Marie-Dominique Chenu*). For Chenu, the theologian is not merely concerned with the past events of salvation history but, more importantly, how those events are brought forward and effect history. The signs of the times, then, are the field of God's self-communication. For Potworowski, the signs of the times refers "to a fundamental category defining the relationship of Church and world in an age of newly discovered historicity. The signs of the times are the markers by which the Church orients itself and its activity in the world."

The discussion that followed raised a number of issues. First, was the meaning of the category of "reading" as a hermeneutical category. Second, was how the ambiguity of a reading or the tentativeness of an interpretation impacted our notion of truth. Third, was the problem of evil and the interpretation of the signs of the times. How do we distinguish between ideology and authentically human historical movements? Finally, it was asked, who does the reading? This touched on the role of the Magisterium when one of the signs of the times is the increased understanding and involvement of the laity's role in the Church.

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