

RECEIVING VATICAN II—INTEREST GROUP

Topic:	Reading the Signs of the Times
Conveners:	Robert Imbelli, Boston College Christopher Ruddy, Catholic University of America
Moderator:	James F. Keating, Providence College
Presenter:	William Portier, University of Dayton
Respondent:	Laurie Johnston, Emmanuel College

Our three-year stint of reflecting on the Second Vatican Council began with *questiones disputatae* concerning what we believe is the foundational document of the council, *Dei Verbum*. We then moved on to the Church and decided to conclude with obedience to the council's call for every generation to examine the signs of the times and interpret them in light of the Gospel. Our choice as guide was William Portier, an expert on the history of American Catholicism, who spoke on "Jesus and the World of Grace, 1968–2014: Reading the Signs of the Times Then and Now." In the background was a central concern of the conference for the fragmentation of Catholic theology today. It was our hope that Dr. Portier's presentation would help explain why it is that liberal and conservative Catholic theologians in the United States are no longer motivated to spend long weekends discussing their craft together. In our estimation, he did just that.

Portier approached his task with his usual verve and humor, but with serious intent. His claim was that in the 1970s Catholic theology lost its proper christological center. In its stead, theologians posited a world suffused with supernatural grace with no clear connection to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Although a clear theological mistake from a Catholic perspective, this trend was at one with the general malaise of the time. To drive this point home, Dr. Portier noted that in 1979, Jackson Brown was nominated for Album as well as Male Pop Vocalist of the Year on the basis of his classic album "Running on Empty," but was bested by the soundtrack to "Saturday Night Fever" and Barry Manilow for "Copacabana." A cultural nadir of which none lower can be conceived! The theological corollary would be the popularity Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx, whose popularity in that decade well outstripped their intrinsic merit, while the work of Walter Kasper appears more substantial in retrospect. However, the theologian who most embodied the trend Portier outlined is Karl Rahner, especially as his thought was encapsulated and disseminated in *The World of Grace*. Whatever the subtlety of Rahner's own writings or the intention behind his overall project, his message was shaped by the pluralist ethos that prevailed in the wake of the council. The all too common takeaway from Rahner was that the only significant difference between Christians and non-Christians was one of self-understanding. Nothing happens in the church and the sacraments that does not happen in the world always and everywhere; the Church and its sacraments just bring it to thematic symbolization.

A course correction was inevitable if Catholic theology was to reflect the abiding faith of the Church. Portier credits theologians such as Henri De Lubac as well as the papacy of John Paul II with undertaking this difficult task. While Portier allows that this project of reclamation might have gone on for too long and underplayed some important elements of the Council, it also made possible the christocentricism of

Pope Francis. Francis emphasizes many of the causes of liberal Catholicism—the primacy of grace and mercy, the prophetic mission of the Church, collegiality among the college of bishops, including the Bishop of Rome—but does so in manner faithful to the founder of his order: Christ firmly in the center. The great issue of our fractured times, our sign in the sky, is how liberal Catholics will respond.

Laurie Johnston responded with a proper academic balance of skepticism and desire to understand. Not convinced that Christ had been lost during the generation following the Council, she emphasized advances in the Church's involvement in the struggle for justice throughout the world. Indeed, she wondered whether concerns over the centrality of Christ might leave us with a Church less invested in the world. For her, the advent of Francis is in fundamental continuity with the work of the theological community since the Council. This is the kind of dialectic we desired and it is our fervent hope that the CTSA will find more places for it in the future.

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