



On Theologians as Blind Guides

Those who would cling to the kind of bliss ignorance brings would be well advised to continue not reading the things written and published by professors at the colleges and universities to which they send their sons and daughters to be educated. This is true not just of public, nonsectarian colleges and universities but private institution as well, including those that are associated with a particular religion and whose teachings presumably should be in conformity with that religion.



Consider, for example, a 2002 book I recently came across called *Questions and Answers on Vatican II* by a Catholic professor of theology named Maureen Sullivan and published by the Paulist Press. As the title suggests, it is written in a Q&A format with the author supplying both the questions and answers. In this sense, it is like the old Baltimore Catechism. In the hands of Maureen Sullivan, however, the format loses its simplistic charm and becomes a vehicle for undermining, wittingly or otherwise, the faith of both Catholic and non-Catholic Christians who may suffer the misfortune of reading it. As evidence, I need only cite the answer to the question she poses as number 54, “You mean the Council Fathers were pulling back on the church’s traditional missionary activity?” I quote the answer in full:

No, but we now have a different kind of mission activity. Vatican II gave us a new understanding of the church and its mission. There was a time when we thought the Roman Catholic Church had a clear calling — to convert others to the truth, and to bring them to salvation. We had the truth, we had salvation. Others did not. Vatican II changed this way of thinking. For one thing, the Council Fathers opened the door to the value of ecumenical dialogue: discussions among differing Christian churches as well as non-Christian religions. The underlying assumption was that if God is the creator of the universe and of all humans, then the presence of God can be found everywhere on earth and in all peoples — reason enough to presume there is a value in interfaith dialogues. This insight would have a serious impact on the way we understood the church’s outreach. No longer would the primary focus of missionary activity be to simply convert others — not if we truly



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believed that God was already present in the world and in humanity. Our task now would be to give witness to the world of the universality of Christian redemption, to be a special Christian presence in the world.

It would be hard to imagine, let alone write, a more thorough repudiation of the Great Commission, recorded in both Catholic and Protestant Bibles, which was given by Christ to the Apostles: “Going therefore, teach ye all nations: baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you. And behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world.” (Matthew 28: 19, 20)

The Great Commission is yet to be fulfilled, but the Apostles moved rather quickly and a large portion of the world’s population was baptized taught of the Lord within a few centuries. And it’s a good thing, too, because it was important to get that work done before Maureen Sullivan came along with a “new understanding” and unbaptized and untaught the people — or at least ordered a halt to the continued effort to baptize and teach — all in the name of the Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council. It reminds me of the scene from that magnificent motion picture *Patton*, showing General Patton receiving the message from Eisenhower’s headquarters to “Stop: Do not take Palermo. Repeat: Do not take Palermo!” What made the scene so amusing was that Patton was riding triumphantly into Palermo as an aide read him the message.

“Ask them if they’d like me to give it back!” the old general replied.

The author of *101 Questions and Answers on Vatican II* has given the Great Commission back to the Lord with an implied, “No, thank you,” and without question or apology. Worse, she claims this great decommission was ordered — or at the very least recommended — by Vatican II, without citing any evidence that Vatican II said any such thing. In order to engage the argument it would be helpful to know the document or portion thereof on which she based her airy platitudes.

This is, sadly, typical of what too often passes for post-Vatican II scholarship. It is almost a dead giveaway when you hear someone, be it clergy or lay, cite “the spirit of Vatican II” that the argument being pushed runs, in fact, contrary to both the letter and spirit of Vatican II. Still, it would be bad enough if this misrepresentation had been made by a non-Catholic teaching a course on Vatican II at a secular university. One might then say that the university should have obtained the services of a Catholic theologian or at least a Protestant knowledgeable enough about the council to present its declarations honestly and fairly. But the real story is worse than that.

For the author was much too modest when she gave her byline as simply Maureen Sullivan. As a blurb on the back cover reveals, she was then, and remains, Sister Maureen Sullivan, OP, for Order of the Preachers. She is a sister in the Dominican order who teaches theology at Saint Anselm College, a Catholic liberal arts college run by monks of the Order of Saint Benedict in Manchester, New Hampshire. So Catholic and other Christian parents pay somewhere in the neighborhood of \$40,000 a year (mitigated in some cases by financial aid and scholarships) per student for their youngsters’ education at a Catholic college where at least some of the students will be taught that the Church no longer has a mission to try to convert other peoples to the faith of Jesus Christ, but has instead a primary mission “to give witness to the world of the universality of Christian redemption.” In other words, it appears, to celebrate with non-Christians, including many who have never been baptized and in some cases have never heard of Jesus Christ, the fact that they have been “universally” redeemed because God created the world and all the people in it, so God is “already present in the world and in



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humanity.” Apparently, the Council Fathers, as represented by Sister Sullivan also repealed the doctrine of Original Sin.

And she would have her readers — and presumably students in her theology courses at Saint Anselm College — believe that this doctrine of universal salvation came out of the Second Vatican Council. Such a doctrine not only did not come from the council, it contradicts the teachings of the Church and the mission given to it by Christ himself, as recorded in the sacred Scriptures. Yet Sister Maureen’s students may graduate from Saint Anselm College believing otherwise. And they may still believe otherwise when their hair is turning gray as they struggle as grandparents to finish paying their student loans.

Is it any wonder then that a survey just published by the Pew Research Center has found once again that a great percentage of believers in America are remarkably ignorant of the teachings of their own religions? The survey found nearly half of the Catholics questioned did not know that the Catholic Church teaches that the sacramental bread and wine, when consecrated at Mass, become the Body and Blood of Christ. More than half of the Protestants surveyed were unable to identify Martin Luther as the father of the Protestant Reformation. One wonders how many Protestants or Catholics believe that the Ten Commandments came to us by way of Charlton Heston in 1956.

Ironically, many of the sweeping changes that were made in the Catholic liturgy and parish life in the aftermath of Vatican II were supposed to increase the understanding by Catholics of their faith and promote an even wider understanding through the ecumenical and interfaith dialogues of which Sister Sullivan sang so triumphantly. They appear to have had, if anything, the opposite effect. We have come to a sorry state of affairs when, as the Pew report states, those of us who practice our faith, however haphazardly, know less about the teachings of our respective faith traditions than do atheists and agnostics. Practice, it would seem, not only fails to “make perfect,” it promotes confusion.

If those misrepresenting the faith, intentionally or otherwise, can go on teaching as tenured professors at religious institutions, it should no longer be surprising when the (more or less) faithful members of a parish or congregation are found languishing half-nourished in the semi-darkness brought on by the spreading of false and heretical doctrine. It was, after all, the Founder of the Christian faith who warned us about blind guides who lead the blind into pits. But perhaps Sister Maureen has discovered a “new understanding” of that as well.



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