

HORIZONS

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Spring 2012

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Plus Reviews of 30 Books

THE JOURNAL OF THE COLLEGE THEOLOGY SOCIETY

PUBLISHED AT VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY

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Printed in the United States of America

HORIZONS

THE JOURNAL OF THE COLLEGE THEOLOGY SOCIETY

Horizons, The Journal of the College Theology Society is published biannually in Spring and Fall at Villanova University.

Yearly subscription: individual, \$16.00; institutional, \$40.00. Send remittance, payable to College Theology Society, P.O. Box 465, Hanover, PA 17331. Changes of address should also be sent to this address. *Horizons* is automatically received through membership in the College Theology Society.

Editorial and business correspondence, book reviews, advertising copy and orders for single issues (individual \$8.00, institutional \$20.00) should be sent to the editor at the Villanova University address (see below). Phone: 610.519.7302. E-mail: horizons@villanova.edu.

Articles are indexed in *The Catholic Periodical and Literature Index*; *Arts and Humanities Citation Index*; *ATLA Religion Database*; *Index to Religious Periodical Literature and Religion Index One*; *New Testament Abstracts*; *Religious and Theological Abstracts*; *Social Science Citation Index*. Book reviews are indexed in the *Index to Book Reviews in Religion*. *Horizons* is available in microform from University Microfilms, Inc., 300 North Zeeb Road, P.O. Box 1346, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346. It is also available online in full text to ATLAS (ATLASerials) subscribers.

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The College Theology Society is a professional organization of college and university professors of religion in the United States and Canada.

The purpose of the College Theology Society is to improve the quality of the teaching of religion: by stimulating and sharing scholarly research; by developing programs of theology and religious studies which meet student needs and interests; and by exploring, evaluating, and encouraging effective ways of teaching which are interdisciplinary and ecumenical.

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From the Editor

At the threshold of yet another anniversary of the Second Vatican Council—the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Council on 11 October 1962—I have a confession to make. I'm sick of Vatican II.

Not, of course, of the “event” of the Council where “something happened” (as John O'Malley has demonstrated conclusively), nor of its official texts (which offer a necessarily inadequate crystallization of the event's dynamics and of the *longue durée* of retrieval and interpretive understanding that preceded it). Nor of the conciliar consensus to put the revelation of God's grace in history front and center, as shown by the twin emphases both on Scripture and Tradition (together the “single sacred deposit of the word of God” [*Dei verbum* §10]) and on “the world of today” (*in mundo huius temporis*, in the official title of *Gaudium et spes*) as the arena where grace is experienced and its implications interpreted and applied. Nor of the Council's remarkable openness to non-Christian religious traditions, especially Judaism.

Rather, I'm sick of the endless reductive discussions of “Vatican II” the symbol, the talisman wielded by those on all sides who claim to know the true “spirit of the Council” and use it to silence serious discussion of Christian virtue in a much different “world of today.” The symbol becomes a conversation-stopper that asserts some supposedly self-evident point: either that the Council made Catholicism hostage to a bankrupt modernity or that its radically new vision forever rescued Catholicism from the Counter-Reformation. Anyone with a dose of hermeneutical sense will know why those extremes are way off the mark and why past receptions of the sacramental depth of Christianity, even modern ones, can still be active and life-giving today. But they will also realize that the Council's religious, cultural, and political context differs from today's, and that a simple transfer of conciliar insights from then to now is invalid.

My concern, though, is that this anniversary will provide yet another excuse for analyses that turn solely inward (to ecclesiastical politics or to disputes over the authority of a “pastoral” council, for example) in order to define authentic Catholic identity with a bold boundary line. Of the catalysts for such introspection, a prominent one today is fear—a fear that mainline religious identity, appearing fragmented and precarious under pressure from political and cultural forces, will be forever lost if not retrieved from its “classic” high point and replicated exactly. That the Council was such a classic event is clear; that Catholic identity can be distilled for today from such a different context is not.

The challenges to Christian identity are not answered by more ecclesial introspection but by ecclesial intentionality outward: incarnating Christian virtues in “the world of today.” As Graham Ward puts it, in this world “the forces of dehumanization, dematerialization, and depoliticization are strong and hegemonic; new poverties and new slaveries proliferate; and we are sleepwalking into a future that threatens to overwhelm if grace and a transcendent goodness cannot prevail” (*The Politics of Discipleship* [2009], 300). If the gospels tell us anything, it is that transcendent goodness can prevail only as a result of the particular performances of that goodness. One of the Council's major insights is that the Christian tradition is not a “thing” handed on but rather a continuing and developing flow of graced life and discipleship in light of the Easter mysteries. That tradition, as an ensemble of practices and reflections, must engage the present with more than “No” and more than a critique of secularization; it must disclose where grace is to be found in practice. The worldwide economic crisis, the crisis in health care delivery and cost, the ongoing war in Afghanistan and its toll on combatants and non-combatants, the reduction of meaningful life to a series of market forces and reality TV programs, the continual revelations of clerical sexual abuse of children—is there a Catholic alternative to these experiences that truly illumines the specific presence of transcendent goodness in our particular context and that carries moral credibility?

The watchword of the Council is still the moving confession that opens *Gaudium et spes*: “The joys and hopes and the sorrows and anxieties of people today, especially of those who are poor and afflicted, are also the joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties of the disciples of Christ, and there is nothing truly human which does not also affect them.” Today those hopes and anxieties arise in contexts much different from anything those attending the Council could imagine. At the time of yet another anniversary, then, our own imaginations must be capacious and generous enough to discern new possibilities for grace in those vastly different, challenging, and even ambivalent contexts, in order for transcendent goodness to be incarnated.