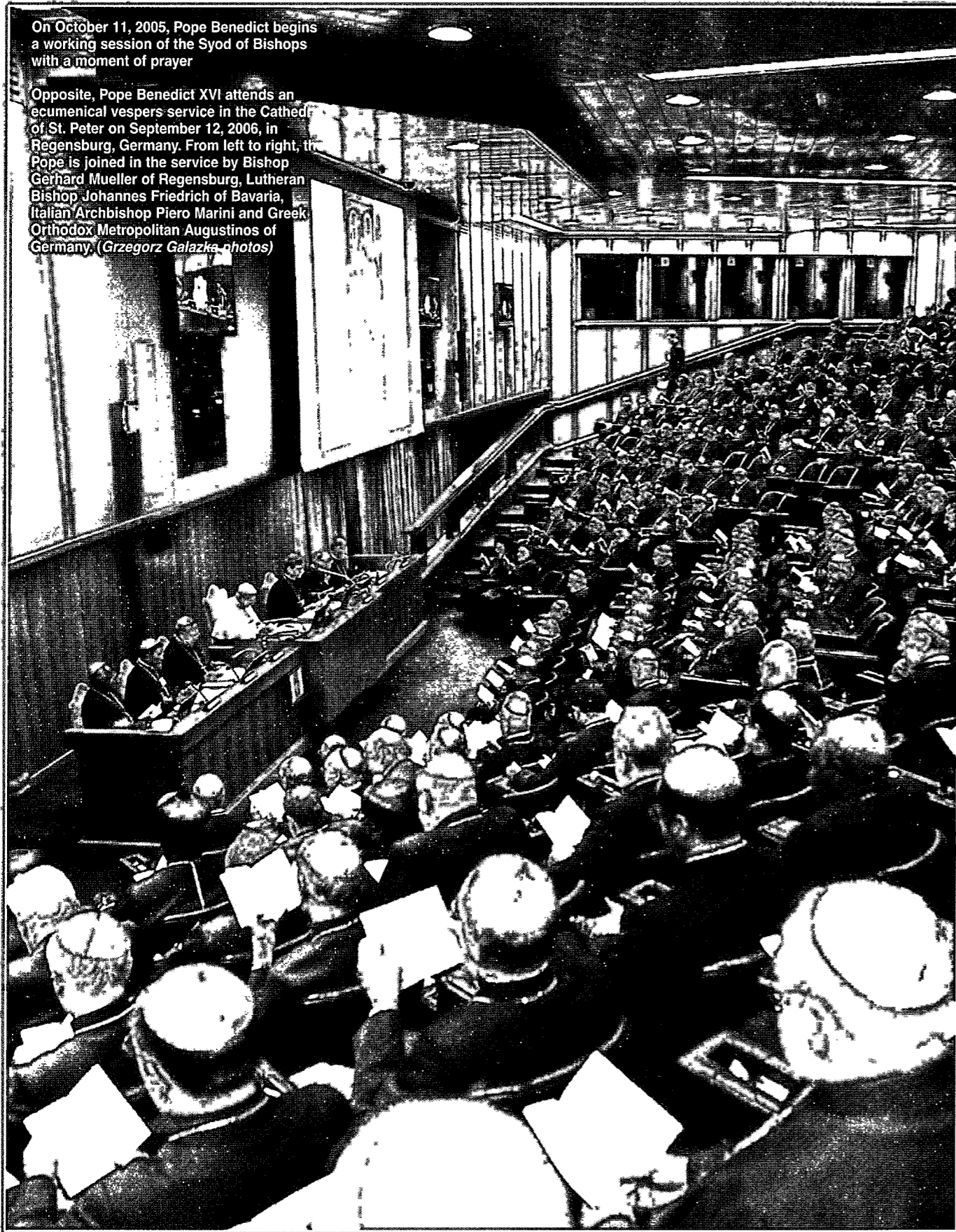


On October 11, 2005, Pope Benedict begins a working session of the Synod of Bishops with a moment of prayer

Opposite, Pope Benedict XVI attends an ecumenical vespers service in the Cathedral of St. Peter on September 12, 2006, in Regensburg, Germany. From left to right, the Pope is joined in the service by Bishop Gerhard Mueller of Regensburg, Lutheran Bishop Johannes Friedrich of Bavaria, Italian Archbishop Piero Marini and Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Augustinos of Germany. (Grzegorz Galazka photos)



BENEDICT XVI AND THE MANDATE OF THE COUNCIL:
TO "DETERMINE IN A NEW WAY THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
THE CHURCH AND THE MODERN ERA"

■ BY THOMAS STORCK



On the occasion of the 90th birthday of Benedict XVI, there are numerous reflections that suggest themselves. Many of us, myself included, look back with fondness at the richness of his teaching as Pope. His magnificent catechesis on the relations between faith and reason — as exemplified most notably in his Regensburg address (delivered on September 12, 2006, the same day as the ecumenical service depicted above) — stand as an example of Catholic thought at its best. Of course, contrary to a superficial — or worse — understanding of Benedict, his was not a *conservative* papacy, a papacy only to be undone by the vagaries of the “leftist” Francis. Benedict, like any orthodox Catholic, displeased conservatives as much and as often as he did liberals. In this connection, one can hardly forget the unfortunate remarks of a certain American Catholic commentator on the alleged gold and red passages in *Caritas in Veritate* (the “gold” by Benedict himself, the “red” by unspecified advisors) to see how far Benedict departed from the conservative political caricature.

What, then, was Pope Benedict? I suggest that a key to understanding his papacy, as well as that of John Paul II, was Benedict’s address to the Roman Curia on December 22, 2005, a talk devoted in part to the 40th anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. Alluding to Paul VI’s closing address to the Council, Benedict made the following remarks: “In the great dispute about man which marks the modern epoch, the Council had to focus in particular on the theme of anthropology. It had to question the relationship between the Church and her faith on the one hand, and man and the contemporary world on the other. The question becomes even clearer if, instead of the generic term ‘contemporary world,’ we opt for another that is more precise: the Council had to determine in a new way the relationship between the Church and the modern era.”

Herein lies, I think, the key to understanding what Benedict, and before him John Paul, were about. In order to see this better, let us take a short historical detour.

Pagan antiquity and the Christian Middle Ages were both hierarchical societies, not only in the sense that they were usually monarchies, but that the religious, political and economic orders existed in a hierarchical relationship. Public life was permeated by religion and its obligations. Such an approach to the social order began unraveling in the 16th century, and this unraveling was complete by the 19th.

In the new order of modernity there is no hierarchy, religion is merely a private matter, and the public life of society is conducted with little or no reference to God or revealed religion. Economic concerns are now foremost, and especially in Protestant countries, everything is judged by economic criteria. In Catholic Europe the old forms of public Catholicism had largely continued until the French Revolution of 1789, and the Church was slow in recognizing that a fundamental change was taking place. Thus the Popes and prelates of the 17th or 18th centuries saw themselves as contending with discrete heresies or threats — with Jansenism, say, or Gallicanism or the various royal attempts to destroy the Jesuits — but did not perceive that something much more basic was occurring, that an entirely new social order was being introduced.

After the defeat of Napoleon, some in the Church seem to have imagined that things could return to the conditions of the 18th century. With Pius IX came a real attempt to grapple with the changed situation, but one that was short-circuited by external political and even military interference, which forced the Pope into the mode of simply reacting to events. But after Pius came Leo XIII, and if any Pope of the modern era deserves the name “the Great” it is he. Leo realized that a new era had arrived for humanity and thus for the Church, and without sacrificing



the integrity of doctrine or tradition, he mapped out an effective Catholic response that served his successors well up until the 1960s.

But for various reasons, as the 20th century progressed, Catholics grew tired of following Leo's blueprint, and hence the calls "to determine in a new way the relationship between the Church and the modern era." John XXIII and Paul VI were both transitional figures in this, in some respects carrying on the Leonine policies, but in important ways sketching something new.

With John Paul II and Benedict this new relationship of the Church with the modern era took definite shape. Whether or not Benedict, had he not, unfortunately, abdicated, would have continued with this policy we have no way of knowing, but there were signs that he was beginning to realize that, unlike Leo's program, the new program initiated with the Council was far from a success.

What was this new "relationship between the Church and the modern era?" It included both internal and external aspects. Internally, it allowed for much greater freedom, both legitimate and illegitimate, for theologians, and other Catholic thinkers. It deemphasized the sure foundation of Thomistic philosophy, a foundation that had served well to ensure that theology remained orthodox. It uncoupled any strong nexus between doctrine and praxis — most obviously in the liturgy — and in fact often seemed to root praxis in little more than moods of current thought or the perceived aspirations of our contemporaries.

Externally it emphasized the role of the Pope as world figure, something desirable in many respects, but nonetheless dangerous, for it meant that henceforth Popes would have the temptation to avoid offending anyone, to meet in friendly accord with diverse groups, whether Protestants, Muslims, Jews, secularists, pagans, politicians or anyone, and say things calculated to promote good feel-

ing, to measure their words like politicians or statesmen, to speak almost from two sides of their mouths, one for Catholics for internal consumption, the other for non-Catholics for external consumption. But the remarks made *ad extra* could not help but be read or heard by Catholics, and so there was often confusion as to exactly what the stance of the Church was, especially in the case of ecumenical or inter-religious matters.

Under this new "relationship between the Church and the modern era" the Church has floundered. The Catholic intellectual revival that began so hopefully in the 19th century ground to a halt, conversions decreased, Catholic "leakage" became a torrent, and no longer could one expect that most any Catholic one meets will hold to anything like the official teaching of the Church. Now I am far from accusing Benedict, or any of his predecessors, of wanting anything like this. But I do suggest that their desire for a new stance toward modernity led, certainly contrary to what they expected, to our present desperate situation.

Thus while rightly celebrating the achievements of Benedict's reign, I think that if we really want to understand his place in the history of the Church, we would do well to look at his pontificate as an attempt to carry out and solidify what he saw as a chief task of the Second Vatican Council, to jettison or at least significantly revise the Leonine program and devise a new policy which would "determine in a new way the relationship between the Church and the modern era."



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