

SPIRITUALITY

Reading the Signs of the Times Rightly

Randall B. Smith | Oct 25, 2014



Each age thinks of its own controversies as eminently sensible, whereas future ages tend to find them somewhat ludicrous.

Change seems to be in the air. And I heard someone say the other day that “it’s inevitable; we need to read the signs of the times.” When I first became a Catholic during my senior year in college, I often used to hear people use that much-quoted phrase from the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*), which says that the Church is supposed to “read the signs of the times.” I love that document, and I teach that document to my students every year (although I may be one of the only people left who does so). But when I teach it, I point out to my students that the phrase about “reading the signs of the times” is only the first part of a sentence. What the Vatican Council actually says is a bit more sophisticated.

After a long introductory section laying out the two-sided character of the technological progress made by the modern world — tremendous increases in our power to do good, on the one hand, side-by-side with tremendous increases in our facility to commit even greater evils, on the other — the Council finishes its introduction with this: “Inspired by no earthly ambition, the Church seeks but a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ under the lead of the befriending Spirit.” And it is in the very next sentence, then,

that we get the famous phrase: “To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of reading the signs of the times and of *interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.*” [Emphasis mine]

Thus, the context provided by the actual document, not quoting out of context, makes clear that “To carry out such a task” — meaning “to carry forward the work of Christ” — the Church has always had the duty (this isn’t something new) of “reading [another translation has ‘scrutinizing’] the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.” Why that last part gets left out, I can’t quite say. But it does. And when the last part of the phrase gets left out, people who use it often seem to be suggesting that the Church should just open up her sails fully to the winds of change and go wherever the wind blows. “Reading,” taken in this sense, would mean “following.”

“Reading the signs of the times,” in this sense would be something like “reading the handwriting on the wall,” or “reading the tea leaves,” as if to say: “Here is the direction history is moving; you don’t want to be ‘left behind’ by history, do you?” Or as is often said: “You don’t want to be stuck in the Dark Ages.”

I’ll have more to say about the folly of trying to “keep up” with the most recent historical fads in a moment, but for now, I want to focus on the notion that the Church has always been scrutinizing the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. What does this mean?

Think about it. Let’s say I’m a Christian living in the Church in the early Fourth Century A.D. What do I find going on around me? Although the Gospel was preached originally within a Jewish context, even in Paul’s day it had begun to spread among the Gentiles. Thus, although Jesus himself spoke Aramaic, the Gospels were written in Greek. And as the Gospel spread among the Greek-speaking peoples around the Mediterranean, it was natural that they would think about the Christian mysteries in light of their own categories. Preaching the Gospel to the whole world was clearly in accord with Christ’s intention and the nature of a “catholic” church. But the success of the Gospel brought with it challenges as well.

Allow me to mention just one. Among the Jews, who defined themselves as distinctly monotheistic, Paul’s description of Jesus as “the Christ,” as “the Lord,” and as “the one whose name was above all other names,” clearly indicated he was talking about the one and only God. There is no one else “whose name is above all other names,” and “the Lord” *Adonai* in Hebrew, translated by Jews of the third century B.C. with the Greek word *Kyrios*, then translated into Latin as *Dominus*, thus the English word “Lord”) is the word the Jewish people would use instead of saying the sacred four letters (YHWH) that, according to Exodus, represented God’s reply to Moses’s question: “Who shall I say sent me?”: “Tell them that ‘I am who am’ sent you.” Thus, when Paul says that Jesus is the one “whose name is above all other names” and in calling him “the Lord,” it was not unclear that these early Christians were claiming that Christ was the same as the one God they all worshiped, since all Jews were dedicated monotheists and defined themselves over against other cultures and faiths precisely in this way.

But now let's say I'm a Christian living in the Greek world of the Fourth Century A.D., and I'm talking to Greeks and Romans. For many of them there is not merely one "God," there are many gods. So when Christians preach that Jesus Christ is the "Son of God," someone schooled in classical Greek literature might be asking himself: "Do you mean 'son of god' like Hercules was the son of Zeus — part god, part human? Or do you mean 'son of god' like Apollo was the son of Zeus — fully a god? Or do you mean 'son of God' the way, say, Achilles or Aeneas was a 'son of a god' — fully human, but with divine parentage"? There was plenty of room for confusion.

To make matters worse, some bishops trained in Greek philosophy were suggesting that "the Son" was something like the "first emanation" from the God-head in accord with what were thought to be very sophisticated neo-platonic ideas at the time. Church leaders like the Bishop Arius were teaching the Son was the first creation of the Father, and that, to use the official phrase: "There was a time when He [the Son] was not."

To make a long story short, in response to these challenges (both cultural and intellectual), representative bishops from around the world and from all parts of the Church got together in 325 A.D. at the Council of Nicea to, in essence, "scrutinize the signs of the times in light of the Gospel message." And although the Council fathers found a lot of good things that Greek thought and Greek philosophy had contributed to the Church, they recognized that there was a new element of confusion that had arisen as well. The Council fathers did not reject Greek philosophy outright; indeed, the definition they would eventually promulgate, clarifying that the Son is "one in being" (*homo-ousios*) with the Father, a phrase that, controversially, appeared nowhere in the Scriptures, was in large part drawn from the categories of Greek philosophy. But by no means did the Council fathers merely "give in" to the "spirit of the age." They understood the challenges they faced; and they responded in such a way as to restate and clarify the Gospel message within this new historical, cultural, and intellectual context.

It goes without saying that we aren't exactly facing today the same challenges Council fathers faced. Unlike our forebears, we don't have Christians around the world willing to beat up bishops and throw them out of their cathedrals because they have become entranced with the categories of neo-platonic philosophy—but they did in the fourth century. We might think they were a bit ridiculous, but then again, they might find it more than a bit odd that people in our time are invading Churches to deface them because bishops were denying that two men can get "married," have "sex," and raise children.

Each age thinks of its own controversies as eminently sensible, whereas future ages tend to find them somewhat ludicrous. Did people ever really argue (with what were thought to be real, "scientific" arguments) that Negroes were not "fully evolved" humans, or that interracial Jewish marriages were damaging the "purity" of the Aryan state? Yes, they certainly did. And plenty of people believed them — just as plenty of people now think that whether or not a fetus is a "human person" is a very legitimate question.

The point is, if we “scrutinize the signs of the times,” we’ll recognize (pretty quickly in fact) that we probably don’t have to spend a lot of time arguing against aberrant neo-platonic philosophies or about the challenges of Aristotle’s philosophical works to Christian orthodoxy. But we do, very sadly, have to spend a lot of time arguing for the dignity of the unborn. Our question must be: What is God calling us to do now, in our own age. Our challenges will not necessarily be (and usually aren’t) the challenges faced by our forebears. There is usually little need to re-fight old wars. As T. S. Eliot suggests in “Little Gidding,” the fourth of The Four Quartets:

*We cannot revive old factions
We cannot restore old policies
Or follow an antique drum.
These men, and those who opposed them
And those whom they opposed
Accept the constitution of silence
And are folded in a single party.*

We don’t have the same challenges today. Rather, we must face our challenges, not merely rehearse theirs. This is what it means to “scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel message.”

There are, quite naturally, dozens and dozens of similar examples one could give: from the intellectual challenges of the newly-discovered works of Aristotle in the thirteenth century (Are there “two truths”: one Aristotelian, one Scriptural?) to the cultural challenges faced by the missionaries to Asia in the sixteenth century (Should we insist that these new believers use bread and wine instead of tea and rice?) to the challenges in natural philosophy faced by churchmen in the seventeenth century due to the works of Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo (Does what science tells us overrule what the Scriptures say? Or vice versa?) to the cultural challenges posed to the Church by the Protestant Reformation (Who has the authority to interpret the Scriptures authentically?). Each age has had its own challenges. And thus each age requires vigilance and profound, often difficult efforts to clarify the faith in response to these new challenges — always trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

It would be very much contrary to the historical record to suppose that all these “developments” in Church doctrine happened seamlessly, calmly, and without much argument in a fairly simple battle between the “good guys” (“us,” the “faithful ones”) and the “bad guys” (“them,” “the unfaithful heretics”). Such silly notions of a clear line of “development” owe more to nineteenth century Hegelian philosophies of “progress” than they have anything to do with actual notions of doctrinal development in the Church such as one finds in the writings of, say, John Henry Newman. Church history can be a messy business. The Holy Spirit has not promised that He’ll tell us everything at once, clearly and in ways that we can understand immediately, merely that He’ll guide us and protect us. Think of the role of the Holy Spirit in your own life. He’s there; you just don’t always know it. Nor do you always understand the direction you’re being led until you’re much further down the road toward your destination.

So please understand: “reading” or “scrutinizing the signs of the times” and “interpreting them in the light of the Gospel message” was not a new innovation or a unique project of the Second Vatican Council. It has been the constant job of the Church since the moment when the Apostles were cowering frightened in an “upper room” after the crucifixion of the Lord wondering: “What now?” “What does being the Messiah mean now that the Messiah has been crucified? Perhaps we need to do something serious re-thinking of our previous concepts, in the light of this new revelation” — that is to say, in the light of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ and His sending of the Holy Spirit to be with His Church until the end of time.

It is for reasons such as these that, whichever direction the cultural winds seem to be blowing, I prefer that the sail remain firmly attached to the Ark of the Church. Indeed, the more all the fellow officers, associated deck-hands, and crew members are resolutely “on board,” working to keep the ship upright in high seas, and headed in the right direction — the “right direction” being the one that leads to God, and not merely where the wind happens to be blowing as it swirls around us — the less anxious I become. By the same token, given how dangerous the seas are in which we’re now sailing, it tends to concern me when I hear whispers of mutiny, constant grumbling among the crew, and threats to change course or jump overboard, instead of us re-dedicating ourselves to row hard, bail water, and work the lines.

Randall B. Smith is Professor of Theology and current holder of the Scanlan Foundation Chair in Theology at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas. He was also the 2011-12 Myser Fellow at the Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture.