

# Old, new theology much the same

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

About a year after the Second Vatican Council adjourned, the late Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner came to the United States for a brief lecture-tour.

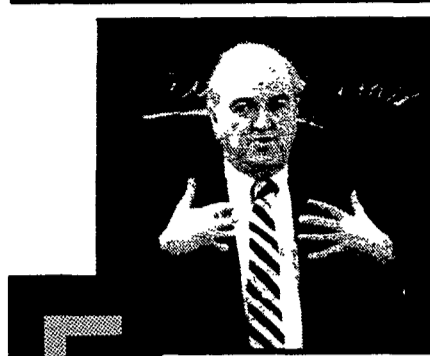
During an informal discussion with young Jesuit scholastics at Weston College in Massachusetts, Father Rahner was asked how one could best learn the new theology. "First, learn the old theology," he replied.

That advice is still valid today. Progressive Catholics who came to adulthood after the council can't really appreciate the new theology if they aren't familiar with the traditional theology that preceded it.

At the same time, younger conservative Catholics can't responsibly reject the new theology in favor of the old without ever having learned the old.

This column offers a few true-false questions to test both sides' knowledge of the old theology.

1. All of the church's official teachings are of equal weight.
2. There are no limits on the teaching authority of the pope.
3. Only the pope can appoint bishops.
4. Only the pope can call and preside over an ecumenical council.
5. Mary's messages at Fatima, Lourdes and elsewhere are binding on all Catholics.
6. The truth of the Catholic faith can be demonstrated by reason alone.



## ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

7. Because Jesus is divine, he shared none of our human limitations, especially sexual temptation, ignorance and error.

8. Jesus' death on the cross was the self-sufficient cause of our redemption.

9. The minister of the sacrament of matrimony is the priest who performs the wedding.

10. By the will of Christ, the church has a diocesan structure, with an individual bishop heading each diocese.

All 10 statements are false.  
1. Anyone who thinks otherwise has no knowledge of the theological "notes" that were universally employed in the old manuals of theology (all the way from *de fide divina* to *certa in theologia*, with at least a dozen other notes in between). These notes assigned a precise de-

gree of authority to each of the teachings of the church and to various theological interpretations of those teachings. It was never simply a matter of "infallible vs. non-infallible."

2. The ordinary teaching authority of the pope was always understood to be limited by the Word of God itself. However, the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) even limited the pope in the exercise of his infallible teaching authority. He can, for example, teach infallibly only on matters of faith and morals, and he is infallible only when he is in the act of defining a dogma — not before and not after.

3. In fact, the present system of papal appointment of bishops is a modern innovation (19th century). From the earliest years of the church and for centuries thereafter, bishops were elected by the people, by the clergy, by cathedral chapters, and even by political leaders. There is no single method mandated by divine law.

4. The first ecumenical council at Nicaea (325) — the one that defined the divinity of Christ — was called by the emperor, not by the pope. Even the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) was presided over by James, not Peter.

5. Marian apparitions are in the category of private revelation. They bind only those who claim to have seen and heard the Blessed Mother. All other Catholics are free to believe or not to believe in them.

6. In its teaching on the relationship between faith and reason,

the First Vatican Council rejected both fideism (which holds that reason has no role to play in understanding our faith) and rationalism (which holds that reason alone can apprehend the truth of faith). If the latter were true, many, if not most, non-Catholics would be morally at fault for remaining outside the church. Indeed, they have been so regarded by unecumenical Catholics.

7. As St. Paul put it, Jesus was like us in all things save sin (Hebrews 4:15). Sexual temptation is not sin. Ignorance and error are not sins.

8. St. Paul also said that "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins" (First Corinthians 15:17). The resurrection was not simply Jesus' reward for enduring the agony of the cross nor only a proof of his divinity. It was an integral, indeed the central, even in our redemption.

9. That was a trick question even in the pre-Vatican II Church. The ministers of the sacrament are the couple exchanging their vows. The priest simply witnesses the marriage on behalf of the church.

10. At the time of the New Testament various local churches had different governing structures. Indeed, "bishop" and "diocese" are terms that would have been foreign to any contemporary Jew, including Jesus.

A lot more of the old theology can be found in the new theology than many Catholics on either side of the line realize.

# 'The people in darkness see a great Light'

By Cindy Bassett  
Courier columnist

Before anything else came into existence, there was Jesus Christ. He is God and has always existed. He created everything. He is the Light that shines in the darkness of the world. The darkness came when the people in the world turned away from him to go their own way.

Even with the darkness, the Light could never be extinguished. Although what the people did saddened God, he made a promise. The prophets wrote it down long ago so that no one would ever forget. The promise was this: "Someday I will come to save them."

There were centuries of silence that followed the promise. Finally, one day, it was time for the promise to be fulfilled. It started quite simply with the appearance of a star.

Everyone who saw the great light was drawn to it even if they didn't know what its dawning meant. Some of the people felt a wonderful sense of joy deep inside. Others were quite troubled by it.

"King Herod, the royal astrologers are here," a servant announ-

ced at the palace in Jerusalem.

The king barely gave the four astrologers time to assemble before he unleashed a barrage of questions.

"Well, what do you make of it?" King Herod asked as he paced in front of them. "Is this bright light a new star as people are saying? Does it move? If it is a star, why is it still visible during the day?"

"Your majesty, we are not even certain that this phenomenon is a star," one of the astrologers began. "Such a configuration in the heavens could be the result of two planets coming together."

"Or, in my opinion," another astrologer added, "it seems to have a long tail, like a comet."

"Yes, it does appear to be moving like a great comet since it first appeared in the sky nearly two years ago," the third astrologer continued.

"If it's moving, then where is it going?" King Herod asked looking from one to the other.

"There are some alarmists who fear this so-called comet may continue on its course until it crashes into the earth with such force that ..." one astrologer said.

"That what?" Herod snapped.

"That it's the end of the world."

The fourth astrologer, who had until now offered none of his own comments, spoke up: "That is only an opinion held by those who do not believe in a higher power," he began. "The religious are saying that this great light is the sign from God that an ancient prophecy is about to be fulfilled."

This last statement seemed to fill King Herod with even more consternation than the conclusion that the entire world would soon perish. "What ancient prophecy?" he asked, frowning.

"You must understand that this prophecy is part of the Hebrew scriptures and we are not entirely familiar with them," the astrologer quickly added.

"Just get on with it," King Herod shouted. "What does this prophecy say?"

"That the Messiah is coming," he told him.

King Herod was strangely silent after hearing this last statement. He dismissed the royal astrologers before calling for one of his closest aides.

"Summon the chief priests and



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their best teachers of the law to the palace at once," he told his aide. "We'll see about this ancient prophecy."

To be continued.  
Scripture Reference: John 1:1-5; 21:25.

Meditation: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned." (Isaiah 9:2)

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