

Commentary on “Focus Man, Notes on Contemporary Questions in Religion”, by John Gilbert Golden & Francis Patrick Green.

(commentary by: John (Jack) Madigan)

In the mid to late 1960's a group of young priests, some recently ordained, known locally as “The Renewal Team” worked in several dioceses giving retreats, missions, and workshops to parish and religious groups and others seeking to understand the Gospel and Church teachings in a changing secular age.

For the young priests, Charles Dickens might have described it as “the best of times and the worst of times”. The refreshing breezes of the Vatican II Council were breathing new understandings and new knowledge to age-old questions of humanity's relationship with God and fellow human beings and it was an exciting time to share a new vision of what Catholicism could become in the wake of the reforms of Vatican II.

Yet, not everyone was happy with the changes. There were those who wanted things to remain the same with ready-made answers to all the questions the Catechism could assemble. They wanted to roll back the changes of Vatican II, they wanted the Church of Pope Pius XI, a Church of the 1940's and 50's, a Church with formulated answers to all their questions. The doctrinal and dogmatic police in both the laity and hierarchy were ready to alert the local hierarchy of any deviation from “official Church teaching”. The young priests had to worry of the possibility of being called to the bishop's office for a “heresy trial”.

Two members of the renewal team decided to draw up a summary document, a kind of Cole's Notes of what they believed to be the Church's teaching on a wide range of issues; concerns which were arising within the groups with whom they were working, questions surrounding topics on the sacraments, including Baptism, Penance, Marriage, and the Eucharist, plus other moral issues with which people were grappling.

Their document, [Focus Man](#), was based on, not only their own training and education for the priesthood, but the Gospel and some of the best and most influential theologians of the time; Gregory Baum, Harvey Cox, Charles Curran, Edward Schillebeeckx, to name a few, plus the documents of Vatican II, and [A New Catechism](#) which the Bishops of the Netherlands said was intended “to make the message of Jesus Christ sound as new as it is”.

While certain aspects of the document could be updated, it is interesting to consider how, after more than fifty years, much remains the same. The Gospel message articulated in the document is still relevant. We appreciate that our “faith” is not just about memorizing a book of questions and answers, about condemning errors, or defining doctrines but it is about assisting in the development of doctrine, about the recognition of religious freedom as a human right. Faith means trust, commitment, and involvement. It means insistence on justice and fairness. Faith is practice – a form of practical knowledge. It is about action; about doing things. It is not a set of rules and regulations like in a board game. One does “religion”; it's about how one behaves.

It was in this context that the Renewal Team was trying to answer the “contemporary questions” of the 1960's and 70's, questions with answers still relevant some fifty years later. It was and remains, “An effort to help people to apply religion to their daily lives.”

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