

VATICAN COUNCIL II

The Council That Had to Happen

THE SECOND VATICAN Council profoundly changed the Church. The Church took on a new mind set. From seeing itself as an unchanging institution in a changing world (*semper idem*—‘always the same’) in Vatican II it declared itself to be The Pilgrim People of God. The Church is immersed in history, in the real world. It, too, is on a journey. It has not yet arrived at its destination—it is not identical with the Kingdom of God but strives to announce the coming of the Kingdom and to prepare the way of the Kingdom.

Where the Church had been largely identified with the hierarchy—the bishops and priests, while the laity was mostly passive—Vatican II, in declaring the Church to be the People of God, declared that the Church is the whole people: laity as well as bishops and priests. The Spirit, it was recognised, works in all members of the Church. Accordingly the roles of the baptised were explored and lay ministries promoted. The Church as Body of Christ is alive and active in all its members enlivened by the Spirit. The Church could come alive.

The Church’s liturgy was reformed to reflect this teaching. It became a celebration participated in by the whole community and no longer rituals performed by the priest which the congregation passively observed. Latin was replaced by the vernacular in the Mass and the priest faced the congregation and presided at the community worship *in persona Christi capitis* (‘in the name of Christ the head’).

Leadership in the Church community was re-examined, and the need was seen to move away from a pyramidal or hierarchical view of the Church which placed the Pope at the pinnacle, the bishops next down the ranks,

clergy next and the largely passive laity at the bottom. Such a view was rejected by Jesus in the New Testament for whom leadership among his followers must be exercised as service.

The way the Church related to the rest of the world profoundly changed. From being on the defensive and fearful of the currents in secular society—such as socialism and humanism, and above all modernism—the Catholic Church set out to dialogue with the rest of the world, abandoning its attitude of hostility and intellectual isolation. It looked for what was good in society and in human interactions. It sought to read ‘the signs of the times’ paying attention to what is happening in the world.

The Catholic Church sought to dialogue with other Christian Churches and with world religions. It emphasised freedom and human dignity and the consequences of the fact that faith is a journey. The old adage ‘Outside the Church no salvation’ was re-interpreted to accommodate the elements of truth, ‘ecclesial elements’, that are to be found outside the visible Catholic Church community.

The Church’s own intellectual life was radically altered. From its claims to ‘timeless truth’ in the *philosophia perennis* (‘the enduring philosophy’) the Church discovered the significance of history and development over time. The major disciplines were renewed – biblical, patristic and medieval studies, as also the study of liturgy and theology. Scholars returned to the sources of Christian theology and Church life.

As a consequence the Church could enter into dialogue with secular intellectuals and participate in the life of the secular universities.

Further, the Church became the Church *in*

the modern world, on pilgrimage with the rest of humanity. It strove to be in touch with the real world and developments in society at large. Such was the message in the opening words of the ‘Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World’ which was expressing an aspiration as much as a fact:

The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.

This was something of what Pope John XXIII meant when he expressed the task of the Council to be *aggiornamento* (‘updating’).

The pastoral mission of the Church was seen to be to dialogue with the people of our time, and to communicate God’s word in a language that people in the modern world can understand.

Thus Vatican II sparked a renewal of theology and worship and a new way for the Catholic Church to be in the modern world.

The Council was a great surprise. Church life and pastoral practice were transformed in ways previously unimagined. But it was not a total novelty; there had been a build-up to the Council such that what happened in the years of the Council itself was to some degree a culmination of developments that had their origins years before. There had been movements in the Church that had been precursors and people who had been pioneers of what occurred in the council.

A book that demonstrates this fact is Thomas F. O’Meara and Paul Philibert, *Scanning the Signs of the Times. French Dominicans in the Twentieth Century*, ATF Theology, Ad-

elaide, 2013. It describes the contributions of seven French Dominicans whose work paved the way for the Council. The seven were Antonin-Gilbert Sertillanges, M-D Chenu,, Yves Congar, Louis-Joseph Lebret, Jacques Loew, Pierre-André Liégé and Marie-Alain Couturier.

These seven theologians provide examples of what creative people—not just Frenchmen and not just French Dominicans, but especially Frenchmen and French Dominicans—contributed to the transformation of theology and ministry brought about by Vatican II.

What this book also shows is the amount of opposition from Church authorities that these pioneers of Vatican II were subjected to. The developments were resisted consistently until they were incorporated into the teachings of the council.

In 1930 Yves Congar composed a prayer that read in part:

God, why does your Church always condemn? True, she must guard the deposit of faith, but is there no other means but condemnation?...If your Church were only more encouraging, more comprehensive...The Church must make itself intelligible to every human ear...The times press—there is so much work to be done. (*Ibid.* p.46)

That may have been so in 1930, but the attitude of a number of influential members of the hierarchy was quite supportive of many of the new pastoral initiatives during the forties and fifties—e.g. Cardinal Suhard of Paris (*ibid.* p.85) and, most significantly, Cardinal Roncalli, nuncio in Paris and future Pope John XXIII (*ibid.* p.87).

Momentum was building and the Second Vatican Council, though it was a surprise to most, was not a bolt from the blue.

—Barry Brundell MSC, Editor

In the course of the twentieth century theologians and pastors passed from an attitude of comfortable entitlement or cultural isolation to a new attitude of apostolic creativity. ... The council brought about a renewal in practice and perspective...that has changed the life of the Catholic Church. (O’Meara and Philibert, Scanning the Signs of the Times, p.xi)