

VATICAN II AND AFTER

My Experience

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I WAS IN ROME studying Theology during the second, third and fourth sessions of the Council. I did not keep a diary, but I did the next best thing: I kept carbon copies of my letters to family and friends, all typed on my portable Olivetti typewriter that had been given to me by my family as a going-away present.

I need to point out that I was in my early twenties when I recorded the events, and that I was a beginning student of theology.

We had twelve or so MSC missionary bishops staying in our college, so we were well placed to follow the events in the Council hall. In addition we were commissioned by some of the bishops to collect the press releases each day on their behalf, so that we got the news of what took place that morning before it was published. And we would pump the bishops for any further explanations that we wanted.

The general feeling we experienced during the Council was the feeling of excitement and high curiosity.

We would come home for lunch at 1.00 pm after the morning's lectures and the bishops would be bussed home from the Vatican about 1.30 pm. We could tell from the noise level of their conversation in the corridor as they passed by our dining room how things had been that morning—quiet conversation, fairly ordinary morning, even boring—but loud excited conversation, something big had happened. We felt challenged to find out more

The Dramas

We knew that there had been dramas from the beginning. Congar explains that the Curia had been able to run the bishops while they were dispersed in their dioceses. In Council, the

bishops were not so manageable. The dramas occurred as the Council took charge.

In a letter at the end of the second session (November 1964) I gave an account of the drama over the Religious Liberty schema. It was rather a lengthy account.

The eventual *Declaration on Religious Liberty* was a major development in the history of the Church. After many condemnations of other religions down the centuries, operating on the principle that 'error has no rights', this declaration teaches that every person should be free to profess whatever religion they choose. Furthermore, while the Church had always insisted on its freedom to exist when in a minority but refused freedom to other faiths when they were in a minority, this declaration acknowledged the universal right of every faith community to exist. These developments were vigorously opposed especially by Italians and Spaniards whose churches were protected by concordats.

Congar in his diary mentions great excitement and agitation, and suspected manoeuvring.¹ Pope Benedict XVI describes the events as a 'battle'², while Xavier Rynne gave a lengthy description of the excitement that was stirred up in the Council hall³. My account substantially concurred with those descriptions, but I filled out the story with some detail and I cannot now vouch for its complete accuracy. But it makes a good story as I recorded it then.

I wrote on 21.11.1964:

'The Council finished its third session yesterday. It was quite exciting while it was on—especially the last week! All the anti-Curia cries are being aired again just when the problem was beginning to be approached more calmly. It has all blown up over the Religious

Liberty schema which was originally expected to be promulgated at the close of this session. The commission worked like slaves to get it ready for printing a good three weeks before the close. It was printed at that time and ready for distribution at that time, but then, mysteriously, was ‘lost’ in the Vatican someplace; the pile of printed schemas would be about the size of a tea-chest. This went on four times, they say—the schemas being printed, then ‘lost’, or else the original being ‘lost’ before it got to the printers. One of the bishops—maybe de Smedt himself—went down with the messenger carrying it to the printers on one of the occasions, and saw it all the way to the printing machine. But blow me down if it didn’t get ‘lost’ again! Finally it was distributed to the Fathers about Tuesday before the Saturday that the session closed.

Came Thursday morning and Cardinal Tisserant got up and said that because a ‘great number’ of Bishops (the Spanish and some of the top-flite Italians) have asked for more time before voting on the schema in order that they might study it better there would be no votes taken this session on Religious Liberty. Silence. Then de Smedt [Bishop Josef de Smedt of Bruges] got up to read his *relatio*—almost in tears he said that the Commission had finished their job on such a date and his text of the *relatio* had been printed on that date, and there was no reason that it should have taken so long to get to the Fathers.

Then the riot began—the Bishops stood up and applauded and applauded—hundreds came pouring in from the bar—a petition to the Pope went around straight away and within an hour had more than 500 signatures. But there was nothing much the Pope could do about it. According to the rules, if a good number want more time they are to be given it. But the Bishops are really savage about the skulduggery that went on to make sure there wasn’t enough time. And it is just as well it occurred on the second-last day of the session, or the Council might have got quite undignified within a week or two. As it is, it seems



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that the Curia has shot its bolt for good and all as far as the Council Fathers are concerned.

Good old Radio Vaticana that night gave us a great piece of objective news reporting: it reported scrupulously the results of voting done just before the rumpus, right down to the *juxta-modum*-therefore-null votes. But when they came to what everyone was waiting to hear, they said only that ‘then Bishop de Smedt presented the *relatio* on the schema on Religious Liberty’, and the news service closed! The Church of Silence.

I don’t know where we will get our excitement from now that the session has ended.

The Magnitude of the Changes

Many people today are hardly aware that there were so many changes occurring in a short time. So many things are now just taken for granted, but they were often quite momentous as we experienced them.

As I experienced it, the issue of clericalism was a major one. In the closing days of the first session Bishop de Smedt denounced the first draft of the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* for its ‘juridicalism, clericalism and triumphalism’—and demanded that a whole new document be drawn up.

The next draft and the final document opened with the chapter on ‘The People of God’—a significant development. The Church is first of all the whole people, not the clergy alone. The laity were very much the Church. It is obvious now, but groundbreaking then.

Anti-clericalism

In my letters to family and friends I expressed my personal reaction to clericalism in Rome that subtly reflected the Council developments.

One letter (21/7/66) showed that I was not finding it easy living in Rome as a cleric. There was too much clerical stuffiness, too many clerics, and too many clerics still living and thinking in the manner of the middle ages. There was also much anti-clericalism. We were spat upon from a balcony in Trastevere by a burly gentleman—a communist (I presume).

There was a clerical caste system, as I saw it, with a consequent distancing of the clergy from the rest of the Church community. It was not the 'People of God' style of Church, and there was little emphasis on the role and responsibility of the laity in the Church.

But there was the Pope John XXIII factor.

The best *riposte* to anti-clericalism, I discovered, was to invoke the memory of Pope John XXIII. Pope John had died on June 3rd, 1963, before I got to Rome in September of the same year, but his influence was still strong. I found that I could settle any argument about the Church, religion, clergy, simply by saying, 'Ma, Papa Giovanni!'—the reply would invariably be: 'Ah, Papa Giovanni—he was different!'

In my letters I related some of the stories about what Pope John used to do and say: he was a really extraordinary character.

Once when he was returning from one of his previously unheard-of train trips he had to wait at a junction somewhere, and when he was told that the wait was because they had to change back to a steam engine from the electric one to get back into the Vatican he said: 'Ah yes, back to the Old Testament!'

Once in a public audience he met a stout missionary, and he went straight over to him, put his arms round him to measure him and said delightedly: 'We're the same size!' The missionary was flabbergasted.

Pope John XXIII loosened up the atmosphere—he was universally recognised as '*simpatico*'. His address at the opening of the

Council is justly famous. It was revolutionary for the times. He stated:

'It seems to us that we must resolutely disagree with those prophets of doom who always proclaim that the worst is coming, as if the end of the world were upon us. In the present time the Bride of Christ prefers the medicine of mercy rather than take up the arms of rigour; she believes that she must face modern needs by showing more clearly the value of her teaching rather than by condemnations. Since that is the way things are, the Catholic Church, while raising the torch of Catholic truth, wants to show herself to be the most loving mother of all, gentle, patient and moved by mercy and goodness towards the sons separated from her.'

Clerical Dress

I particularly reacted against the rules about clerical dress. On 6th June 1964 I wrote: 'It is getting hotter here, and the clerical wear in Rome has not felt any of the modernizing influence since the middle ages in fact. You wear the soutane indoors and out, rain, hail or shine or roast.'

Then in late April 1966 I wrote that 'we have had a revolution here in Rome—we have jumped over about ten centuries in the matter of clerical dress—we now wear suits in the street instead of soutanes! That is to say, when we foreigners wear them these days we are not breaking the rules any more—the Italians, Spaniards and a few other national groups still stick to their soutanes, but eventually they should come round.

The permission shows that a tremendous battle has been won among the Italian bishops. From what we can gather, at the bishops' meeting before last any change in the matter was hooted right out of the house. Many were quite hostile, it appears. All this 'degrading of the priestly state to the level of the world!' And the big argument was: 'If they don't wear the soutane, what will hold them in?'—having in mind that as soon as the priests wear something less conspicuous they will get up to every

kind of mischief.

Then all of a sudden, at the last meeting a complete about-face was achieved—well, not quite complete—the changeover has sent the local clergy into quite a dither’.

One day I was riding my bicycle in Rome wearing my clerical suit (1/3/67). Some students from the Spanish college (wearing their soutanes) commented loudly: ‘*sembra un kangaroo!*’ (*He looks like a kangaroo!*) I don’t think they knew how close to the mark they were.

The People of God

My awareness of the Church as ‘People of God,’ was slowly developing. In October 1963, soon after my arrival in Rome I was present in St Peter’s for the opening Mass of the Second Session. I wrote: ‘This morning I saw the pope from very close. I was about twenty feet from where he delivered an address, and when he was carried out in his *sedia* (his special chair the Italian nobility carry him in at functions) I was much closer still.

This morning’s was the first liturgical ceremony we’ve been to in St Peter’s. Mass was celebrated by the pope. It gives one a clearer idea of the Church—shows you just how human it really is. What I mean is that in Australia I knew alright that the Pope was really a human being, but in the back of one’s mind the Pope and the hierarchy seemed to always have a sort of aura or something around them all the time. But then to see them in actual fact and to attend Mass with them (the Council Cardinals and Bishops were all there this morning), taking part in the same ceremony so that in actual fact you are rubbing shoulders with them in the Church, all that brings home the fact that the Church is a big crowd of human beings with all the limitations of human beings, but with the Holy Spirit working away in the midst all the time, with the patience that he needs when dealing with humans. So to speak, it comes as a jolt to find that what you knew already was true—there is

not a group of semi-divine beings governing the Church from Rome!

Liturgy

I was very aware of the need for liturgical reform. Liturgical practice reinforced the marginalization of the people. I made many mentions of liturgy in Rome and Italy.

I wrote in July 1964:

‘Your questions, ‘I suppose you are well ahead in the liturgy over there, are you? Probably have Mass in Italian?’ evoked one of those patient, wry smiles that most foreigners cultivate automatically within a short time in Rome. Liturgically, Rome is in pretty bad shape. There is not a sign yet of vernacular in the Mass—but that is one of the lesser things to be hoped for. The people have to be given a bit of solid religion first. For the most part they don’t seem to know what the Mass is: they wander around the church all the way through Mass touching statues and blessing themselves, carrying on conversations with the rest of the congregation, lighting candles to the Madonna and making as much noise as is physically possible as they put the coin in the slot.

There is a saying in Rome that the only people who go to Church are the ‘skirts’—the women-folk and the clergy. It is not quite true, but uncomfortably near to the truth. The men, by and large are a pagan lot.’

In May 1965 I mentioned the annual May procession of the Madonna, when everyone becomes a fervent Catholic for the space of two to three hours. The first communicants are dressed up fit to kill, with the girls in wedding dresses and much fanfare with brass band and roses. I commented: ‘One wishes they would get a tenth as interested in the essentials as they are about the trimmings’.

When we went on holiday to Rieti, about thirty miles from Rome, we found the state of Catholicism even worse!

On 19th March 1964 I wrote: ‘The pope has given some very hopeful directives about

the training of seminarians—only in general terms yet, but the Council will follow it up quite obviously. Liturgy has just been imposed as a major subject in seminary studies, which is most progressive, and will mean a terrific lot in a few years time—the Easter ceremonies (I was writing at Easter time) will come into their own at last.’

Liturgical renewal was taking place in our community; we had concelebrated Mass every morning, mostly concelebrated by the student priests, as the older priests of the community didn’t feel inclined (12/11/66).

After many centuries of Latin, the vernacular languages were starting to be used. There were some difficulties with the beginnings in Italy: we students were asked by the local parish priest to come along and answer up and give volume to the responses (21.3.65).

Theology.

As a theology student I found that Vatican II made theology interesting and exciting! The dry scholastic text books gave way to texts that incorporated the new understandings of Church and of Revelation. I wrote:

‘There are a number of very important movements going on in the intellectual and pastoral fields at the moment—have been for some years—reaching their high-water mark in the council battles going on now. So things are really stirring everywhere; a real rejuvenation. and you can feel it in most of the lectures at the Greg. [Gregorian University]’. (15.12.1963)

There were also some reforms in the system of learning at the Gregorian University. (8/1/67). The language changed. Whereas lectures and exams, written and oral, had always been in Latin, now they began to move into Italian. Also a new schema on seminary training was approved by the Council, which included a pastoral year, and more stress on pastoral training.

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Return to Australia—My Efforts to Share the Experience

Upon my return to Australia and in my early years of ministry I found that Vatican II gave us language that people were able to hear—it spoke to people of that time

I returned keen to start work, and even offered to be available for ministry while on holiday and waiting for an appointment. I presided at Mass in a girls’ college and one of the girls was seen taking notes on my homily. I presided at a parish Mass, and heard one of the volunteers in the parish say: ‘Why haven’t we heard this before?’

When I started lecturing in St Paul’s National Seminary, a seminary for mature students for priesthood that operated from 1968 till 1998, the students who had been consumers in the pews all their lives delighted in the theology they were learning.

We presented a series of lectures for the public which we called ‘The St Paul’s Lectures’. Thirty to forty people came out at night to listen and learn.

I became involved in presenting the Certificate of Religious Education courses for teachers in the Sydney Archdiocese. The teachers often began the course because they needed more qualifications to work in Catholic schools, but found that they liked what they were learning.

The theology of Vatican II responded to people’s needs.

Still feeling the need to extend my horizon I began part-time studies at the University of New South Wales and gained a Doctorate in the School of History and Philosophy of Science. I was an Honorary Fellow for some years, participating in the academic life of the School.

Pope John Paul II admitted that the Church had made grave errors in the Galileo Affair, causing difficulties in the relationship between the Church and the modern world right from the outset of the modern period (31st October 1992).

At the University of New South Wales I

particularly enjoyed the re-trials of Galileo that we presented as staff-student activities for a number of years.

Usually I took the role of Cardinal Bellarmine. At the first re-trial, with the audience as the ‘jury’, Galileo was declared innocent. We of the prosecution got our act together in future trials and had him judged ‘guilty as charged’—he *had* presented the Copernican system as a picture of the real world, despite his promises not to do so. (The fact that his judges adhered to an essentially fundamentalist interpretation of Scripture was irrelevant for the trial.)

Another time I took the role of Giordano Bruno—and was complimented for showing that Bruno deserved everything he got!

After many years of lecturing at St Paul’s seminary I was posted to Rome and had time to present a ‘*Cursus Specialis*’ (an optional course) at the Gregorian University on ‘Catholic Theology and Science’.

The Statement of Conclusions

The *Ad Limina* visit of the Australian Bishops to Rome in 1998 and the subsequent document *Statement of Conclusions* was a reality check. Collegiality, such an important principle in Vatican II—that the Pope and bishops were the successors to Peter and the other eleven apostles—was still not the way the Church was governed.

I was in Rome in May 1998 and I was told then by a monsignor who has worked for many years in one of the dicasteries that the word getting around the Vatican was that everything in the Australian church was going downhill—parishes, religious education, priestly ministry, religious orders, prayer life...everything! He was wryly amused by the generality of the negative assessment, but I took it as a warning of what might lie ahead.

The *Statement of Conclusions* was a predominantly negative assessment of the state of the Church in Australia⁴. Obviously the unrepresentative minority who had been bom-

baring Rome with letters of complaint—in one period of time more complaint mail was arriving from Australia than from the United States—had been listened to and apparently believed.

One sentence in the concluding paragraph of the *Statement of Conclusions* provoked an important discussion here in Australia about who has the right to do what in the Church. The sentence, or rather the disputed part of it reads: ‘the meeting between the Church in Australia and the primary collaborators of the Roman Pontiff’⁵.

Here we were, back to where we were before the Vatican Council started, with the inflation of the power of the authority of the Roman Curia at the expense of the legitimate authority of the college of bishops.

The collegiality of the bishops was affirmed in Vatican II but no way of safeguarding it was put into place. After the Council the Curia were still able to govern the Church from Rome, and the bishops spread throughout the world were not able to exercise their rightful authority. The *Statement of Conclusions* was a clear instance of a national bishops’ conference being over-ruled by the lesser authority of the Roman Curia. This lack of collegiality will be a challenge for Pope Francis.

But, after my experiences of Catholic life in the diocese of Rome, what I personally found the most galling thing of all was being lectured to about the quality of Church life in Australia by the collaborators of the bishop of the Church of Rome.

REFERENCES

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3. Xavier Rynne, *The Third Session*, Faber and Faber, London, 1964, 1965, pp.254ff.
4. Cf. *Compass*, Winter 1999, vol.33/2, pp.26-35.
5. *Statement of Conclusions*, from the meeting between various Dicasteries of the Holy See and bishops representing the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 14 December 1998, p.34.