

Vatican II: Impressions of a Struggle of Minds¹

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The way in which the first phase of the second Vatican Council developed has surpassed the most optimistic expectations. It is undoubtedly true that constitutionally nothing has been decided, nor has a single conciliar document been definitively approved. *Denzinger* is as yet unable to adopt anything from this Council. And yet I feel that it has already passed the turning-point.

We know, as we always have, that the dogmatic significance of a college of bishops spread out over the whole world is the same as that of a world episcopate gathered together in synod. But experience here in Rome has shown that psychologically and sociologically these two manifest themselves in astoundingly different ways. Thoughts on the subject of the renewal and remodelling of the apostolate of the Church, which many a bishop in his see humbly kept to himself or expressed only with hesitation and caution, were at first only whispered diffidently in Rome, until people discovered that practically all their colleagues were thinking the same way. A moral harmony found expression which had been there all along without being put into words. The mutual contact of bishops, from so many lands and from all parts of the world, released what had obviously, and for a long time, been crying out for authoritative formulation. For that is precisely how we define a council.

Alas, some are bound to see these happenings exclusively in the light (or the darkness) of the opposition: conservatism *versus* progressiveness. They secularize what has taken place, though the 'worldly' element is undoubtedly deeply embedded here. Even while the Council was sitting there appeared a book of more than 600 pages, not obtainable through normal channels but distributed among the council fathers, with the title *Complotto contro la Chiesa* (Rome 1962), written by a certain 'Maurice Pinay'. In an extreme and absurd manner

¹Translation of an article by one of the foremost theologians at the Council. It appeared in the Dutch weekly *De Bazuin*, 1963 No. 13 (Jan. 5) pp. 1-5. A second article will be printed next month.

the book reflects what at the time of the Council was printed in some Italian newspapers; that the Council was a clever manoeuvre to push through the reluctant *apertura a sinistra* (the Italian idea of a breakthrough). One passage is enough to illustrate this: '... a veritable fifth column of agents controlled by Freemasons, communism and the secret powers that command them; some of these agents were even to be found among those cardinals, archbishops and bishops who form a kind of progressive wing within the Council and who are trying to get the various reforms adopted . . . and all this ostensibly in order to modernise the Church and to align her with the times, but with the hidden intention of opening doors to communism, to hasten the collapse of the free world and to prepare for the imminent destruction of Christendom' (p. 1). But even disregarding this kind of reactionary nonsense, it is an over-simplification to characterize the council debates, which were conducted graciously and courteously, in terms of an anti-thesis between conservative and progressive fathers-in-council.

There is, however, no denying the presence of a spiritual demarcation within the college of the council fathers, but how to define the dividing line is another matter. Both sides labour with tireless devotion for the well-being of the Church, and as the line winds its arbitrary way through the world-episcopate it takes no heed of national loyalties, passing straight through most of the national episcopates whether they be Trans-alpine, Asiatic, or South American. Even Italy, Spain and North America are aware of the division somewhere in their midst.

On either side of the almost untraceable dividing-line people's thinking and working stems from the self-same faith, the Catholic and apostolic faith. And yet one sometimes gets the impression that the others are speaking from a faith apart. One is astonished to find oneself more in sympathy with the thinking of Christian, non-Catholic 'observers' than with the views of one's own brethren on the other side of the dividing-line. The accusation of connivance with the Reformation is therefore not without foundation. What is, in fact, happening then?

TWO WORLDS. For at least 63 per cent of the world episcopate (and I would call this a conservative estimate) the Church's salvation lies along paths quite different from those of the remaining 37 per cent, who in fact saw their way of thinking reflected in the prepared theological schedules or schemata of this Council. The experience of these bishops, who in their practical pastoral care are confronted spiritually

and physically with the human and ecclesiastical problems of today, gave them quite a different view of the problems that were posed. It was heart-warming to hear for instance how Chilean, Brazilian and Indian bishops, involved in pastoral concerns and for that reason to some extent unaware of the development of trans-alpine theology, on hearing an exposition of some theological theme, would add the spontaneous comment, as if of one mind with the speaker, 'this really means something to us'. The living contact with human reality had given them that open-mindedness, which only needed to be 'filled', or sometimes just to be put into words. As against this there is not merely a theology, but a whole attitude of life and way of thinking among bishops and theologians who, for some reason or other (sometimes understandably), have lost or are likely to lose contact with the world or with reality. A 'world of ideas' stands like a screen between them and reality, and they are not aware of it. This world of ideas they see as the reality in which they live. This was the painful experience during the first phase of the Council. Certain bishops and theologians, whose concern is not pastoral and who, in some cases, have never had anything to do with pastoral work, are in danger of losing contact with the world.

This, I thought, was where the dividing-line could be found—where the one thinks essentially (and it is more than a 'way of thinking') and the other thinks existentially. This is, it is true, an over-simplification. But from the tenor of the original theological schemata and from discussions with these bishops and theologians it is clear that this is where the fundamental difference begins. The 'essentialist' attitude regards the mysteries of our faith and of human life as if they were abstract essences which, first and foremost, must be formulated as precisely as possible. Now I too hold no personal brief for vagueness and fanciful dreaming about the faith. The perspective in which the mystery is intimated to us must certainly be defined carefully if we want our faith to remain inwardly meaningful. But for the 'essentialists' something else is at stake. For them, apparently, the mystery is held in the grasp of their ideas. The exact formulation of an unchangeable *essence* was to be the main purpose of the Council. *Nella sua formulazione piu esatta*, that is how the *Osservatore Romano* summed up the Report or *Relatio* in which the schema 'On the sources of revelation' at the nineteenth General Congregation was presented to the council fathers. It had become the main concern of the preparatory commission to formulate the faith as precisely as possible. As precisely as possible—

this implied measuring, regardless of historicity, the content of the faith as an abstract essence, like an immutable and measurable number (it used to be said of 'essence' that it is like a number). When essentialists speak of people, they do not speak of human beings but of 'human nature'. In speaking of the Church they mean a kind of precipitate, an abstract 'essence Church', which is one (and one cannot be two, or divided, so there is only one Church, which knows no division), and this abstract essence, as such, is placed in reality. The fact that this essence then finds itself in rather a strange world is so much the worse for that world, which will have to give way wherever this 'essence' makes its appearance. (The schema on 'Church and State' is very revealing in this matter.) That the world does in fact make way, but in an unexpected manner, for it turns away from this essence, they can only attribute to sinful nature. Is the Church not inevitably 'a sign of contradiction'?

TRAGEDY. There is an element of tragedy in this way of thinking, in this attitude to life. On the whole we tend to treat these people somewhat harshly, and in so doing we are drawing the dividing-line more sharply. It is not unwillingness on their part. They simply 'cannot existentially do otherwise'. For these people to think non-essentially means skirting the truth. Hence the consternation, even panic, when after the first large-scale vote it was found that the majority of the world episcopate had abandoned the essentialist mode of thought. So despite our heartfelt joy, any sense of triumph is unthinkable. And it is as if the council fathers were instinctively aware of this tragedy. For whereas in spite of insistent requests not to applaud, they repeatedly showed their approval of a speech by one bishop or another, of a speech that came straight from the heart or that went straight to the core of the problem, when the Pope—that magnificent figure—at the crucial point in the Council, recognizing the moral majority, ordered the theological schema on the subject of the sources of revelation to be removed, the papal announcement was heard in a moving silence. No applause, although the fathers could not contain their joy. One observer said to me afterwards: 'that silence was like the breath of God's Spirit. Applause would have spoilt the spiritual meaning of this Council'.

And yet there is something incomprehensible in this tragedy. How is it possible that these people, although existentially incapable of other than 'essentialist thinking', when confronted with the different mental-

ity of the majority of the council fathers, do not even for a moment begin to doubt their own ideas? Surely the majority cannot all be heretics? I cannot understand this, and I do not want to understand it, for fear of being unjust. Perhaps this attitude is essentialist thinking taken to its ultimate and extreme conclusion, the conclusion that we are heretics.

PASTORAL CARE AND THEOLOGY. So the first phase of the Council was a revelation, a bringing to light of something which was there, though originally veiled and latent. From the beginning the council fathers let it be known that they had not come to Rome to 'consolidate their positions' as some had wished, but to take a leap towards the future of the Church; *aggiornamento* became the watchword. Biblical, ecumenical, pastoral, these were the words that rebounded again and again from the walls of St Peter's. I am not giving away any secrets when I repeat the newspaper report of how Cardinal Ottaviani gained his reputation for being a good loser. During the penultimate week of this first phase of the Council, he presented his statement 'Concerning the Church' with the quip, 'Yes, I know what you are going to say: *Tolle, tolle*, take that statement away, it is neither biblical, nor ecumenical, nor pastoral; it is scholastic'. There was sympathetic applause. The cardinal went on to show that his statement was indeed pastoral, ecumenical and biblical. But for the essentialist these terms have a completely different connotation.

In any case it would be somewhat naive to attribute all disagreements to existential leanings on the one hand and essential on the other. The situation in the various sees of the world Church is so diverse that open minds will suddenly (or so it seems) turn reactionary or vice versa when certain problems are raised. These pastoral bishops think pragmatically rather than theologically. Many of them are still subconsciously 'essentialists' (after all that is what they were brought up to be), but they have applied themselves heart and soul to certain practical problems, as for instance to the whole question of liturgical revival. It is possible to give these pastors practical guidance, on matters of religious tolerance for example, without first stating a philosophic or dogmatic basis for tolerance. Life is more convincing than theory.

And then there are still some bishops each one of whom is a world unto himself. Delightful museum-pieces, for whom time does not seem to exist. During the morning meetings in St Peter's they murmur their rosaries, or have a nap, they say the offices during the opening

mass, or they visit the Blessed Sacrament at one of the side altars, and when they suddenly hear their name called, because their turn has come to address the meeting, they ferret about for their few sheets of paper and then, for precisely ten minutes, they say their piece, so completely out of this world that this is the signal for the Fathers' exodus to the canteen. Then the man returns to his seat, without any self-satisfaction, unconcerned, completely matter-of-fact, as if he had just been to close a window, and resumes his muttered prayers or dozes off to the sleep of the just. Sainly phantoms from long bygone days. But perhaps they are very near to the Lord, on whose gracious pardon this Council depends.

THE FINAL RESULT? Is it possible at this stage to surmise what the outcome of Vatican II is going to be? Yes, in principle it is. The majority have expressed themselves in favour of a different approach. This fact cannot be gainsaid. On the other hand, this majority is realistic enough not to want it all their own way. They will take the minority into account, and eventually some sort of compromise is bound to be at least the official outcome of the Council.

The Council is faced moreover with all kinds of unknown factors. In the first place there is the possibility that it might have to be wound up because of the death of the all-inspiring Pope John. On the other hand, no new Pope could ever pretend that Vatican II had never been—even if no officially approved document were available.

Then there is the long interim period from December 8th, 1962 to September 8th, 1963. But the Pope has already seen to it that there could be no repetition of what has occurred in some preparatory commissions.

Finally there is in my opinion one other doubtful factor—the 600 bishops of the C.E.L.A.M., that is, those from the Latin-American and Mexican bishops' conference. They have been the top stakes, as it were, in the 'lobbies', to put it crudely, of theologians from both sides. They still have vulnerable areas which can cause them to veer one way or another. They are receptive to modern ideas and yet they are also a little afraid of them. In many respects, they are also dependent on all kinds of authorities. In my opinion, we have here another unknown quantity, not so much in the young dynamic South American theologians, but in their bishops.

Completely unresolved still is the problem of the relationship between the 'collegiate' government of the Church (by the world

episcopacy under the leadership of the Pope) and the 'central' government of the ecclesiastical Curia. I think that this problem is going to be the main issue of the second phase of this Council, if God grants John XXIII time to bring *his* Council to an end.

Our faith is still the old 'Catholic' faith, no other. But a faith that is alive.

Four Ancient Reviews of the Wisdom of Solomon

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You are a cosmopolitan citizen of the Mediterranean world (winter apartment in Alexandria) during the middle of the first century B.C. Your interests go as far as religion—scientifically considered, of course—and philosophy. Last year, in partial fulfillment of your curiosity's requirement, you walked down Crocodile Street to the Temple Beth-El bazaar and bought a handsome copy of *The Wisdom of Solomon*. It is there on your shelf now, but you haven't read it. Only the reviews. You had to confess that they left you—uncorseted, shall we say. For one thing, you didn't understand what Riphath ben Gomer meant by 'midrash' (though you had been *reading* midrashic pieces all through your Hebrew Great Books course). Secondly, the last thing you needed was a kosher potpourri.

And so we, pith-hatted finders of papyri, are so very glad that you clipped your reviews and tucked them once and for all inside the covers of that medium-quality vellum.