

Sometimes the Holy Spirit surprises the Church. Some small decision or simple gesture turns out to be much more significant than many official pronouncements from high authority. We are pulled forward into a quite new situation by a seemingly inadequate cause. In retrospect we wonder at the modest beginnings of this new venture. But then why should the Spirit not move with a gentleness characteristic of God's grace?

This, I would suggest, is what happened when Pope John decided to invite official delegate observers from other churches to attend the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican. (It was not unnoticed that the invitations were extended to churches and not just to individuals, itself an act of considerable ecumenical importance.) One wonders what Pope John himself thought this gesture would lead to. It is no secret that his decision was criticized and opposed. All that we can suppose is that he persisted in it, despite the criticism and anxiety it aroused, simply from the warmth and fulness of his heart. It was a simple yet profound gesture which, perhaps for that reason, commended itself more to the Spirit than to men. And if there was opposition in Rome, there was a strong reluctance in some Christian communions to take it at its face value, an institutional suspicion that it might be some kind of snare. But the gesture was made, and observers are now a firm part of that vast and complicated reality which is Vatican II. A firm part – yet how difficult it is to say just what that part is, what its influence will be, or how it can be explained theologically. In time to come, however, some explanation will be necessary. And is it not part of the genius of the Latin Church to provide, in the end of the day, some theological account and explanation of those gestures and decisions which in origin were not prompted by theories at all?

Observers have come to occupy a place in the life and work of the Council. That is now the fact. Historians of the Council's inner life will accord them a place in the Council's significance. (At the simplest level, for example, someone will have to interpret one of the variant formulae with which some of the fathers began their speeches: 'Venerable Fathers, learned *periti*, beloved Observers . . .'.) It would be impertinent for an observer to try to assess that significance, particularly at this stage and perhaps at any stage, but it may be worthwhile to record some impressions.

First of all, the life of observers in Rome is scarcely less arduous than that of the fathers themselves. They attend all the General Congregations, placed more advantageously than the fathers with superb translators and interpreters. I wonder sometimes whether all the observers fully realize how they have been favoured by the Holy See. How many bishops have regular daily access to men like Mgr Francis Davis, Fr Gregory Baum, Fr Bévenot, and the late Fr Weigel – to mention only a few? (Historians of the Council will have to devote a good many lines to Gustave Weigel, S.J.) But

the daily General Congregations, for observers as well as fathers and *periti*, are only a part of the Council. For the rest, the observers' life sometimes overlaps and sometimes is independent of that of the bishops. There are regular meetings with members of the Secretariat for Christian Unity. Here outstanding Catholic theologians expound some aspect of a schema under discussion, and lengthy discussion follows. These are unfailingly interesting, and despite the large numbers involved there is always genuine discussion. (Mgr Willebrands, as chairman, sees to that.) And it is always interesting to see how much from these meetings finds its way to the aula in speeches by the Fathers. Then there are less formal, smaller meetings often organized on a language basis, English speaking, French speaking, etc. And still less formally there is the daily round of lunches, receptions, dinners, where observers and bishops meet, talk, speculate, and gossip. The gossip is not to be despised. It is innocent enough and one of the ways by which people discover their common concerns and hopes. Finally, and often only late in the night, the observers have their own reports to write out.

So there is contact, and more than contact, at two levels. More formally, through the Secretariat, observers make known their views (orally and in writing) of the various schemata considered by the Council. That these are taken very seriously by Mgr Willebrands and his colleagues is certain. It is no less certain that the observers value the opportunity enormously and are not insensitive to this privilege of indirect participation in the Council which has been accorded to them. But perhaps even more important is the personal contact with bishops and theologians. (Will not the historians have also to say something about the coffee bars in St Peter's where prelates, *periti*, and observers mingle daily and often develop friendships far more than casual?) At this level the Anglican observers enjoy special facilities because of the work and continuing presence of our Archbishops' representative in Rome, Canon Bernard Pawley. It is not too much to say that the Pawleys' flat is a kind of centre at the Council. This is another of those small matters to which the discerning historian will give some attention.

What does all this observer activity and experience signify? Only time will tell, but there are unmistakable pointers which, if obvious in themselves, are difficult to describe with precision. First of all, for many of us there has come an exciting glimpse of the vitality of contemporary Roman Catholic theology. The fundamental confrontation at the Council is that of this new theology with an older one. For some of the observers this has been a revelation. They may have known that theologians like Rahner and Congar, say, existed. What they had not expected was the substantial influence of this new theology. Michael Novak, in his lively and informed account of the Second Session, *The Open Church*,¹ calls the old theology 'non-historical orthodoxy'. It is a cumbrous but reasonable label. And it has taken a Council, where differ-

ences between modes of thought are not concealed, to show the magnitude of this struggle of the old with the new. Many years ago Hastings Rashdall spoke for many Anglican theologians when he said that after Trent Latin theology had ceased to be interesting. Neither he nor anyone else could say that now. Observers have found a genuine community of concern with Catholic theologians. Our languages are still different, and we have a long way to go before a true community of discourse is evolved. (By 'language' I refer to something much more important and pervasive than the place of the Latin tongue at the Council – cf. Wittgenstein's dictum: 'A language is a way of life' – but this very reliance upon the Latin tongue is indicative of a whole approach to theology. That, however, is another story.) Until we find ourselves with a community of discourse, in the widest sense, the principle of 'dialogue' must remain a goal rather than an achievement, a most promising goal. What we can now feel sure of is that the difficulties of language and perspective, of how we approach and formulate theological questions, are not in themselves insuperable. Indeed, these very difficulties can be fruitful of new understanding. One wants to say that such difficulties are simply the result of our long isolation from one another. But now, as the Council itself confirms, the twentieth century is confronting us all with the same questions. The questions bring us together. The more we realize that it is our *questions* which unite us, the more readily shall we find ways of overcoming the barriers which obscure the paths toward common understanding. Perhaps the greatest obstacle is that 'non-historical orthodoxy' which is by no means confined to the Latin Church. It has its Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant counterparts. And at just this point we discover that the theological debate of our time cuts across ecclesiastical boundaries. That discovery itself is no small comfort.

It is the Council which has made this discovery possible for many observers in Rome, and it is not a merely academic matter. For a great many of us it entails a much closer study of Roman Catholic theology, old and new. But it does not end there. Once again it is the Council which provides a central point for us all. Those of us who have been present at the Council have been granted a special sense of this new theological and ecclesiastical situation. We are involved in the Council and have a loyalty to it. As individuals we are involved in the drama of conciliar debate. As representatives of our own communions we have become emissaries with a duty to tell our brethren at home of the happenings in Rome. The isolation of centuries has been broken down for ever. In its place has come a new sense of responsibility, founded upon the solid ground of personal friendships, theological discussion, and the conviction that we all belong to one Christian family with common problems and aims.

This, is, I suppose, part of that lengthy process of growing together which is the aim of all ecumenical activity. The Council has added a new dimension to that activity.

For years, in the World Council of Churches, theologians have been meeting, making friendships, listening to one another, uniting in common causes. Yet this has so often meant discussions where people speak from prepared positions, putting an official point of view. This has been necessary and important, but it has its own limitations. What has been happening in Rome is different. Observers have been able to see and, in a way, participate in the self-examination of the Catholic Church as it strives to clarify in its own mind and reform its life and practice. This is very different from that kind of meeting where A speaks for Rome, B for Constantinople, and C for Canterbury. In Rome we have witnessed not only what the Roman Catholic Church decides but how it reaches its decisions, how it thinks and feels and moves. This participation in the inner life of the Catholic Church is perhaps more valuable than any account of the results of the Council.

There are signs that this observer rôle and function will not be confined to Vatican II and that it is on its way to establishment as a regular feature of ecclesiastical meetings throughout Christendom. The British Council of Churches is making use of it, and it will be a disappointment to many if there are not non-Anglican observers at the next Lambeth Conference. (They will be fortunate indeed if Canterbury looks after its observers as well as Rome.)

We return, then, to Pope John's inspired gesture. Inter-confessional meetings must continue; but alongside these, and fulfilling a different function, one hopes for more opportunities of participation in the inner life of other churches. The time is not far off – it is already here – when theologians and ecclesiastics of one communion will in fact consult those of other communions as they seek to clarify and purify their own life, faith, and order. The contacts which will make this natural are being formed. And why should it not be natural? The more we find ourselves asking the same questions the more necessary we shall find it to discuss those questions with all who ask them.

There must be some *theology* of this movement. God forbid that anyone should try to define it – just yet. We are, so to speak, taking one another into our family circles. We are allowing others to see us as we are 'at home', not just our public faces. This is what we so long feared. Can we doubt that all this is the work of the Spirit? Can anyone doubt that Pope John's gesture was precisely that kind of uncalculated, spontaneous, simple act by which the Spirit makes his will known to the Churches?

¹Darton, Longman and Todd: 18s.