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VATICAN II: TEXT AND CONTEXT

Its Impact Is Just Beginning

By Massimo Faggioli

There is little disagreement on the fact that Council Vatican II (1962-1965) is a “corpus” of *texts* that need to be read in their historical *context*, and that its documents are a *letter* that contain also a *spirit*. This idea is reaffirmed in the Final Report of the Extraordinary Synod of the Bishops of 1985. But it is not always easy to distinguish accurately between these two elements of letter and spirit in the debate on Vatican II.

Often we hear, on one side, Vatican II portrayed in an abstract way, detached from the circumstances surrounding the event itself and its reception in the local Churches; on the other side, it has become a mantra to associate Vatican II and “the Sixties” in order to proclaim both of them “guilty by association” in the recurring “culture war.” Complex as it is, the historical context of Vatican II is a key to understanding this most important event in the history of the Catholic Church in the last four centuries.

A first fundamental element is that the announcement of Vatican II took place little more than a decade after the end of World War II, and just when the Western world was beginning to become fully aware (historically, culturally, and theological-

ly) of the atrocities of the Shoah, the Holocaust of the Jews, which took place throughout Nazi-controlled Europe. All this contributed to the church’s self-understanding in relation to world religions in the re-construction of a more peaceful world. On the world map, the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s marked the end of European empires’ dominance in Africa and Asia, and the beginning of that epoch-making series of births of new nations known as the “decolonization.” In this process the Catholic Church was very involved: Catholicism had benefited from the deep and old ties between colonialism and missions, but the process of decolonization taught Catholicism the importance of becoming a world church free from its heavy European legacy.

These changes in international politics transformed Catholic theology with its new emphasis in ecclesiology on the importance of the local church

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(dioceses and parishes) vis a vis the universal church (Rome and the Holy See), and inspired the effort to build ecumenical bridges to non-Catholic Churches. The old rules prohibiting Catholics from taking part in ecumenical events (Pius XI, *Mortalium Animos*, 1928) were replaced, in the preparation for Vatican II, with a more open attitude towards individual non-Catholic churches and the World Council of Churches. At the same time, world Judaism was longing for a more positive theological relationship with the Church of Rome. This was particularly complex because the State of Israel had just been founded in 1948 and it raised both political and theological issues for Vatican diplomacy.

Lay ministries open up

Within the church, during the decades before Vatican II the role played by women in war-torn Western societies demonstrated that the new influence of “the second sex” in Catholic education, in the international youth lay movements, in the tradition of Catholic Action, and in the birth of other new Catholic movements. These experiences slowly opened the door to a new understanding of lay ministry in a world that already in the 1940s and 1950s had become more and more secularized.

These new approaches within Catholic theology were made possible by the eye-opening experience of confronting political ideologies – fascism, nazism, Communism, nationalism – during the 1920s-1940s: Catholicism had learned at a high price how narrow is the boundary between on one side the need to serve “culture” while trying to incarnate the Gospel in a given social and political system and on the other side the duty to be “countercultural” and prophetic. The end of the alliance between Catholicism and authoritarian political regimes of Europe between World War I and World War II made possible the abandonment of an apologetical and controversistic theology as the only possible way to articulate Catholicism, both within and outside. This shift became fully visible and acceptable at Vatican II including: a more positive approach to science and modern culture, a more biblically based theology, more attention to the “signs of the times” and to “terrestrial reality” as a source for theology.

The Rev. Joseph Ratzinger, left, with the French Dominican Yves Congar in 1962, during the Second Vatican Council.

Enter the “new theology”

These historical-cultural changes in the immediate pre-Vatican II world were assumed and synthesized by the council, its bishops and theologians, during the long phase of the council’s preparation (1960-1962). In the dialectic between the Rome-based, neo-Scholastic theology and the “new theology” (which had been silenced in 1950) new voices prevailed, approved by the overwhelming majority of the council fathers. The Vatican II synthesis became possible thanks to the “new theology’s” ability to incorporate a Tradition that goes back to the Fathers of the Church and does not stop with the popes of the “long nineteenth century.”

Thanks to Karl Rahner, S.J., this change is one of the major paradigm shifts in the history of the church: comparable to the importance of the council of Jerusalem (50 AD). Bernard Lonergan, S.J., helped translate Catholic theology from a “classicist mentality” to a “historical consciousness”; Karl Lehmann helped inaugurate a “certain amount of movement and tension moving from Vatican II.” Vatican II thus became a “building site,” as Hans Hermann Pottmeyer said, that collected materials from the best of Catholic theology in the 20th century and opened a new path for the church. Just as the Council of Trent’s (1545-1563) major reforms were realized only in the 17th century, Vatican II’s reception at 50 years has just begun. ■

