

The Second Vatican Council

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11th October saw the opening of the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church. It is the culmination of three years' preparations since the rather sudden announcement of its convocation by Pope John XXIII on 25th January, 1959, which came as a surprise to many. As soon as the announcement was made, the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches made clear its interest in the Council, 'The leaders of the ecumenical movement cannot remain indifferent in the face of this great event which will, of necessity, have a repercussion on the relations of Churches with one another.'

With these generous words quoted in the introduction, as a Roman Catholic, I undertake with confidence, in the lines that follow, the task of explaining to my Protestant and Orthodox brethren, something of what the Second Vatican Council means to a Catholic, and what it aims at. I purposely exclude going into the theological questions which would make the task too vast—and needless to say I avoid all argument. My aim is to show what the Council aims at, in the hope of greater mutual understanding and of winning Christian prayers that the Holy Spirit may guide the Catholic Bishops in their deliberations and decisions.

NATURE OF A COUNCIL

It helps to understand its importance in the eyes of the Roman Catholic Church, when we learn that only twenty such councils have taken place in the 2,000 years of Christian history. The first was at Nicaea in 325—when, against the attacks of the Arians, the Divinity of the Second Person of the Trinity was defined—and the last was the First Vatican Council in 1869-70. Each of these twenty councils marks a stage in Church History, and reflects the problems that confronted Christianity through the centuries.

A Catholic understands a General or Ecumenical Council as the solemn assembly of the Bishops of the entire world, meeting in answer to the summons and under the authority of the Pope, to deliberate and legislate as a body on matters concerning the Church.

Modern means of communication and transport have made possible preparations for this Council, such as no previous council saw. Two thousand and eight hundred bishops and theologians

throughout the world were invited by Pope John to submit proposals and suggestions for preliminary discussion and classification by commissions of experts. This work has gone on industriously for three years, and in July last these proposals and suggestions, condensed into 2,000 pages and made manageable, were sent back to the bishops for their study prior to the actual council.

The stage has been set and everything made ready for the meetings which may continue for many months. The first session will be from October to mid-December, then the bishops will return to their dioceses until after Easter when they will return for a second session. After that everyone is reluctant to hazard a guess as to what other sessions will be needed.

ROLE OF POPE JOHN

To give a glimpse of the Second Vatican Council without a brief picture of Pope John's role in it would be impossible. Where Pope Pius IX took years to decide the First Vatican Council, Pope John admits that he surprised even himself, for he says the idea came to him suddenly like an inspiration. Elected Pope at the age of 78, he was considered something of a 'stop-gap' Pope, but within three months of election he had set under way the biggest event in the Roman Catholic Church for a hundred years.

He looks upon the Council as *the* work of his pontificate, and has taken intense personal interest in the preparations. He has seen that every shade of opinion has been consulted; he has watched carefully that results be not prejudiced by thoughtless expressions and actions that can cause, and have caused in the past, such tragic misunderstandings among Christians. In addition Pope John has, for three years, constantly urged Catholics to pray and beg the guidance of the Holy Spirit for every step of the Council; he asked priests throughout the world to offer the daily recital of their office for this intention, and he has sought the prayers of children—in his own words, 'knowing how powerful with God is the voice of innocence'.

This considerate and kindly way of the present Pope has not gone unnoticed by Christian leaders of other denominations. Dr. Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury, generously remarked, 'The present Pope has, it seems to me, a great good Christian will and love. And where there is love, the results are incalculable.' While the Orthodox Bishop Cassian said, 'His Holiness Pope John XXIII has seen what others have not seen—he has seen Christian unity and the supreme effort which is demanded of our faith on the road that leads to it.'

Invitations have been issued to all Christian bodies to send observers to the Council, and most have been accepted. Pope John's constant care is to avoid opening old wounds. He said in plain terms to the new Secretariat that he set up for promoting Christian unity that it must 'show our love and benevolence for those who also bear the name of Christian . . . in order that they,

too, may follow the work of the Council, and thus more easily find the way to that unity willed by Christ'.

I shall return again to the question of Christian unity, but while on Pope John, it is well to show how the climate of relations between Roman Catholics and other Christians has changed in his short reign. A few years ago who would have imagined the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, the President of the U.S. National Baptist Convention and Orthodox Church leaders calling on the Pope in the Vatican ?

TOPICS AND AIMS OF THE COUNCIL

To complete this sketch of the Vatican Council a brief glimpse at the topics on the agenda is necessary. Past councils have generally had as their main concern various points of Christian doctrine that were under attack or in need of clarification. This Council, however, promises to be pastoral in its orientation rather than doctrinal—though, of course, the latter will often be involved.

It is a truism to say that the world has gone through a tremendous upheaval in the last hundred years, and is still in the throes of it ; and this at so many levels: economically, politically, internationally, spiritually. In this upheaval, man's religious beliefs and practices have often suffered. So the vast problem for Christian leaders today is to find the way to bring Christ back to His rightful place at the very centre of man's life. There is, of course, no question of watering down absolute truths revealed in the Bible, but there are many non-essential, peripheral aspects and customs that change with time and place.

Much of the Council's attention then will be in this direction. Merely to mention by name complex problems, the bishops will consider the role of lay folk in the apostolate, the modernization of administration and Church law, modern moral problems, greater autonomy for bishops in their own dioceses, greater use of local languages in worship in place of Latin.

In general, it can be said that the aim of the Council is a vast self-questioning on the part of the Roman Catholic Church. It is an attempt on her part to face the modern world, in which many think that religion is out-moded, and has no real relevance in the 1960's. With the grace of God, it will surely lead to a deep renewal of religious spirit and vitality. Hence the real fruit of the Council will not be as spectacular or as evident as we might hope, but rather interior and spiritual. But if this is so it can only lead to great things, among which must be greater understanding among Christians.

CHRISTIAN UNITY

Among the topics on the agenda, I have purposely left the tremendous question of Christian unity for separate treatment. When the Council was announced early in 1959, there was at once a wave of high expectation in this line, but as things proceeded,

other topics seem to have come to the fore, and an atmosphere even of pessimism has been apparent at times.

Yet while avoiding wild dreams of sudden and spectacular unions, such pessimism is not well founded. The path towards unity among Christians is not an easy or a short one. The Council will be, as we saw just now, a re-appraisal on the part of the Catholic Church. Every bishop present will have prominently in mind this pressing question, and so we can confidently hope that many obstacles will be removed by their deliberations.

In a world where millions have never heard of Christ, their Redeemer, and millions more whose fathers knew and loved Christ are drifting further and further away from Him, many Christians today experience deep anguish at the realization of the scandalous divisions among believers. This anguish is intensified when we reflect on Christ's prayer just before He went out to His suffering and death: 'I pray—that they may all be one, as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee; so that the world may come to believe that it is Thou who hast sent Me' (John 17:20-21). Our divisions go counter to Christ's prayer, and must bear much responsibility for the unbelief of many. Who of us has not been challenged by a Hindu or a Muslim that if we preach a Christ of peace and love, we should first live in peace and love among ourselves? The tragedy is greater when we reflect that the quarrels and divisions are not really ours, but rather our inheritance from past centuries.

But the climate is changing fast; doors are being opened; old-time foes are meeting to discuss common problems; invitations to each others' conferences and councils are issued and accepted. The Holy Spirit is surely breathing over Christian flocks all over the world.

Yet far though we have come in a single decade, a long road stretches ahead of us, before 'there will be one fold, and one shepherd' (John 10:17). Among Christians within each denomination are found varying degrees of concern and desire for Christian unity. Bishop Stephen Neill, former Anglican Bishop of Tinnevely, South India, writing in a Roman Catholic theological review on the Vatican Council, points out that mission lands lag behind in this matter. There is often bitterness and rivalry among Christians in many regions, to the great harm of the spread of the Gospel. Here in India there are many fine efforts at dialogue between Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic clergy at the individual level, but we still await more co-ordinated efforts. The first step costs much, but if we have something of the humility of Christ, we must be ready to make this first move, and even to withstand initial rebuffs from individuals who have grown up in an atmosphere of mutual ignorance and suspicion—if not worse.

We are privileged to live at a very crucial time for Christianity in India. We are all Christians, we have many problems in common, but above all we have in common our belief in Christ. Differences there are—and it is neither realistic nor prudent to ignore them—but we can meet and discuss, and so make our contribution to that unity willed by Christ for all His followers.

Today Catholics refer to other Christians as 'separated brothers'. Cardinal Bea, an untiring worker for unity, has recently said, 'This is not only a courteous designation, but also a profession of a profound Christian truth. All those who have been validly baptized in Christ are organically bound to Christ through Baptism. They have been bound to His Mystical Body.'

CONCLUSION

The purpose of these lines by a Catholic, and of the hospitality accorded to them in these pages, has been to explain something of the significance of the Second Vatican Council. The journey towards unity can only be made easier by mutual understanding and sympathy. And if these lines have done that, and if they lead to prayers for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the Council, they will have abundantly achieved their purpose. In this line, the Rt. Rev. Arthur Lichtenberger, presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A., called for prayers, both in church service and in private, for this event, which he termed, 'of immense importance for us all'.

The message of Pope John to the Archbishop of Canterbury through the Anglican Bishop of Southwark, Dr. Stockwood, before their historic meeting applies to all of us: 'Two souls can meet in prayer, though distances divide them. Just as on the road to Emmaus the two disciples find their desperate and individual problems solved because of Him who walked in their midst, so in the spirit of Emmaus we can walk together.'
