

Comment

Chenu: 90; Vatican II: 20

We have not yet fully implemented the decisions of Jerusalem I, so maybe it is a little early to evaluate the effects of Vatican II. All the same, quite a long while before the Pope announced next November's Extraordinary Synod several of the world's theological journals had started planning series of appraisals to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Council's closing. Anybody asked to write a "20 years after" piece soon discovers how hard it can be to tell which of the recent changes in the Catholic world originated in the Council and which did not.

According to Rome gossip (something never to be trusted, but a good guide to symptoms) a key to the Synod will be the forthcoming book based on Vittorio Messori's now-famous interview with the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger. In the spring we will be analysing fairly fully some of the ideas which are given an airing in that interview. Here we will only mention that the things which most trouble Ratzinger are not in fact directly linked with Vatican II itself.

He has pin-pointed four major crises of belief: a tendency to reduce belief in God to Christology only; to see the Church just as a human organisation; to treat theology as a private activity starting "from limited human experiences"; to read scripture apart from the witness of the Church. Now, some people would reject this gloomy analysis, but let us suppose it to be true. There is nothing in Vatican II's teaching to prop up the tendencies listed. They are a product of the secularizing influences of our society.

On the other hand, the Council said that "the achievements of the human race are a sign of God's greatness and the fulfilment of his mysterious design"; it said if man "does not enter into relations with others he can neither live nor develop his gifts"; it said "It is only in freedom that man can turn towards what is good". In short, it let down the drawbridge. Ratzinger thinks that the only way the Christian message will recover its edge will be by "renouncing a certain too euphoric post-conciliar solidarity". But how?

On 28 January Marie-Dominique Chenu, perhaps the most charming of the brilliant group of Dominicans of the days of the

Council, celebrated his 90th birthday. His thinking on the central place of history in mankind's encounter with God, which was to make him so important for the priest-worker movement and the Council, had, in 1942, prompted the Holy Office to put his book *Une école de théologie: le Saulchoir* on the Index. Rome had also ordered his dismissal from the post of Rector of Le Saulchoir (then one of the most lively centres of theological study in the Church) and imposed on him silence. The Church eventually acknowledged the orthodoxy of his campaign against decadent scholasticism and what he calls the "déisme" which shaped it. But how much unnecessary misery and frustration there was in the meantime! Policing of the kind which unseated Chenu in 1942 does just about as much good to the Church as plastic surgery does to a desperately sick patient.

Arguably the "too euphoric post-conciliar solidarity" which troubles Ratzinger—i.e. uncritical acceptance of the dominant values of the wider society—has its origins partly in the very inadequate model of communications which for long has been dominant inside the Church. All sorts of people in the Church (not only Vatican officials) have long taken it for granted that "communication" is basically a matter of piping messages to recipients, and in a closed hierarchical world this looks likely. Today, in the West, it is much more obvious that all effective communicating is participatory, and that the communications process is something absolutely central to life, not something additional to life's really important business. Alas, when the drawbridge came down and the People of God were told they were now "adult", and that "heightened media of exchange" were leading to "the unity of mankind", they poured into the big bad world with an outdated model of communications—a model that fosters a basically passive attitude of mind. Is it surprising if, in some people, all that "openness" which was recommended quickly became a "too euphoric solidarity"?

Pushing toothpaste back into tubes is a futile exercise, clearly. If, in its much too brief session, the Synod wrestles in a creative way with one or two urgent matters largely unexplored by Vatican II, it will have far more worthily commemorated the Council. Communications (communications of *all* sorts) would be one very good subject for it to look at. The snag is that doing that could shake *all* of us up!

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