

Vatican II: Misunderstandings at the Council

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We can only rejoice that after the turn taken by the second Vatican Council during its first phase we may justifiably hope for greater freedom for what is, somewhat erroneously, called the 'new theology'. In an earlier article¹ I have already commented on that aspect of the Council. Since then I have given some thought to related aspects of the Council.

When we examine more closely the speeches of the council fathers in St Peter's we have to admit that some of the utterances of the so-called 'open wing' strike us as less felicitous, and such as might evoke, during the second phase of the Council, reactions of a kind that could easily cause confusion in the ranks of this 'open wing'.

The 'Open Wing's' gain.—We are all convinced that the 'open wing' carried the day (and how mundane we are when we represent events in such terms, when in reality the whole of the world episcopacy is aware of the impulse of the Holy Spirit in God's Church). But I am convinced that the 'open wing' has won, not simply because it represented 'progress', but because it brought to the fore aspects of reality which had, apparently, remained unnoticed by the so-called 'closed wing'. It is always the germ of truth behind a certain trend, in profane matters too, that gives it its dynamic force and power of appeal. Untruth as such has no force of appeal whatsoever. But that is precisely why we must not forget that the 'germ of truth', upheld by the 'conservative wing', also possesses dynamic forces which might well, during the second phase of the Council, assert their appeal. And if in that case it is the truth, even only in germ, that elicits our response, we can only acclaim it. It is only the truth that sets us free. But there exists a very real danger that the bias of the 'closed wing' position would gain credence among many council fathers alongside the germ of truth it represents, just because this truth is vested in what I have called a one-sided

¹LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, June 1963 (Both articles appeared originally in the Dutch weekly *De Bazuin*).

'essentialist' attitude. So it may be necessary for the 'open wing' to reconsider its own positions if on 8th September 1963 'conservatism' is not to start off with a new force of appeal. Similarly the more entrenched elements should rethink their positions and move towards an inner 'catharsis' or purging.

The term 'ecumenical'.—Undeniably there were misunderstandings during the council debates, inside and outside St Peter's, especially regarding the terms 'ecumenical' and 'pastoral'. In my opinion the word 'ecumenical' should describe an attitude of mind attuned in faith to a visible unity, not only of love and hope, but also of faith among all people who confess Christ as Lord, and in fact more generally among all people who acknowledge the value of the religious in human life. Because of their belief in the *Una Catholica*, however, the ecumenical attitude of Catholics has acquired a particular stamp. To them the term 'ecumenical' expresses the mind of Catholics who want to do full justice to the totality of their belief. This attitude has introduced a certain distinction between the uncontaminated essence of the Church, as Christ instituted it under the leadership of the apostolic office of the college of bishops headed by the Pope, and the empirical outward form of that same Church in which, through the ages of church history, all forms of one-sidedness could gain access, at least in its external manifestations. As a result certain Catholic values have become obscured in the Church's teaching, and more particularly in its practice. And it is precisely these obscured or neglected truths and values of the faith which (partly also by the inner logic of contrasts) are retained in their original authenticity in the practice of the non-Catholic Christian Churches, even indeed in some large non-Christian world religions, more fully than they are practised by the average Catholic. And that is why it is rightly the ecumenical concern of Catholics to emphasize those suppressed truths and values. In my opinion it was precisely this aspect of Catholic ecumenical thinking that, during the first phase of the Council, achieved an unmistakable break-through, more so than the 'new theology' as such. Not that one can really make this distinction, for the 'new theology' itself is motivated by an ecumenical spirit, and the re-integration of suppressed or overgrown truths into the totality of the theological synthesis is its hall-mark. A break-through for this ecumenical thinking is in fact a break-through for the so-called 'new theology'. We should realize, moreover, that the new theology is just as much concerned with the 'consolidation of positions' with re-

gard to the deposit of the faith—but by a renewal which, since it seeks to reintegrate by means of a return to the sources, calls for a shift of emphasis. For the new theology holds that the Catholic Church, in order to hold its own today as a reality which appeals to people's minds and hearts, should overhaul its entire outward form and rejuvenate itself. This was indeed the basic intuition that made Pope John XXIII decide to hold a general synod.

The Roman Viewpoint.—'Roman theology' on the other hand (I realize this is a simplification, but in view of the bishops' own terms of reference in their interventions in the Council we might as well keep the classification, for lack of a better one) seemed to put quite a different interpretation on the word 'ecumenical' during the Council. Somewhat to my surprise I heard this expressed most strikingly when a bishop in St Peter's complained pathetically: 'But where is all this going to lead, if we are to suppress one Catholic truth in order not to offend our disunited Eastern brethren, and another so as not to upset the Anglicans and finally if we have to preserve a mysterious silence about yet another truth to avoid further alienating the Protestants'. This intervention speaks volumes. Apparently, to Roman theology ecumenical thinking means 'eirenics': suppressing or at any rate soft-peddalling some Catholic truths, which might put the Orthodox, the Anglican, the Protestant off Catholicism.

Reaction of the Fathers.—Unfortunately, some liberal council fathers have in fact encouraged this Roman interpretation of the majority view. But if that represented the ecumenical thinking of two-thirds of the council fathers, then the reaction from the side of Roman theology seems to my mind understandable, even justified. And then I should be glad that the Council produced such a reaction.² For no matter how much we ought, in the first place, to emphasize what binds and unites us in the one Lord, we must not gloss over the real differences with a false eirenism, which, after all, would be nothing but wool over the eyes of other Christians. I say the real differences, and in doing so I am

²I prefer to set aside here the more complicated question of whether it would, for instance, be morally justified from a Catholic-ecumenical viewpoint to declare an actually revealed truth as *dogma* at a moment that the inner life of the Church does not feel the slightest need for such a declaration, and which, seen from the other side, would consolidate the positions of separated Christian brethren vis-à-vis the Catholic Church.

making a distinction between Catholic and non-Catholic faith, and not between the latter and a particular Catholic *theology*.³

Nevertheless the fact cannot be gainsaid that some of the council fathers by their contributions have fortified Roman theology in its interpretation of the term 'ecumenical'. When in an interview with *The Gelderlander* (Tuesday, 18th December 1962, p. 2), Professor S. Tromp⁴ was asked: 'Did you, all this time, think of our separated brethren?', he replied in no uncertain terms: 'Indeed we must try not to offend the separated brethren and we must try not to widen the gulf'. This faithfully represents the Roman position. Ecumenics here clearly implies 'not giving offence'. Consequently his following statement is entirely, and I believe rightly, in keeping: 'In my opinion we can best help to restore unity by stating simple and clear truths. In this way the distance will not be increased, but it will be seen more clearly' *loc. cit.* Quite apart from the subjective meaning which the affirmation 'simple and clear truths' in this context normally has, one nevertheless has to admit that the question of what is the truth remains central (within the bounds of charity of course). Some, for instance, would have liked the Council to keep quiet about the mysteries concerning our Lady so as not to offend other Christians. Quite apart from the question of how this could have been achieved without giving offence to the East, such cirenism is bound to invite reaction.⁵

³For however much the faith itself is expressed in theology, the latter may still place an emphasis where faith itself does not, and in this way differences may arise, e.g., between Catholic theology and the Reformed confession (which is less sharply distinguished from 'theology' than ours is), whereas in both cases one and the same datum of faith is involved.

⁴Fr Tromp is secretary to Cardinal Ottaviani.

⁵Of course the 'open wing' was right to protest against a separate schema on the Virgin Mary, where this same council does not devote a separate schema to Christ or to the Redemption. For although this schema on Mary may repeat *ad infinitum* that Christ is the one and only saviour and that Mary contributed and contributes nothing to salvation that is not Christ's gift and Christ's grace, the fact remains that the Council (the preparatory commission) has put the wrong emphasis and created the impression that a short (and on the whole well-balanced) synthesis of belief on the subject of the mysteries concerning the Virgin Mary seems more important than a statement of faith regarding the mystery of Christ (which was *not* provided by the preparatory commission). In my opinion a protest against a separate schema in this connection is more than justified, for such a schema (however well-balanced it has turned out to be) is bound to cause a shift of emphasis in the life of the Church after the Council. Surely the history of dogma ought to have taught us this lesson long ago!

The Term 'Pastoral'.—A similar misunderstanding arose in connection with the use of the term 'pastoral'. It is well-known how much the Pope of this Council stressed its pastoral character. The purpose is the re-affirmation of ancient truths in such a way that they appeal once more to the people of today. But here too is a danger of misunderstanding, and the council debates actually brought it out. Some seem to have interpreted the affirmation of the pastoral orientation of the Council in a purely *pragmatic* sense, a pastoral care which is less concerned with the truth, or at any rate the formulation of the truth, than with the fully existential experience of faith, for which a vague indication of the content of belief would suffice. I believe Professor Tromp is reacting against this point of view when he says: 'For me the primary pastoral duty is to give the truth' (*loc. cit.*). I would agree with this wholeheartedly. The question is, however, how one interprets this truth: essentially or existentially.

To give new, contemporary expression to a truth does not mean that we can first strip the truth of all human conceptions and associations, so that we can then, as it were, look it straight in the face and, after that, dress it up in its 'new look' attire. The expression of the truth is the insight itself into the truth. There is never a moment, not even a fraction of a second, in which we see the 'naked' truth. The new expression of the truth is not something accidental, but is involved in our very understanding of it. This presupposes, of course, that we do not regard the truth as an abstract essence, as though we could leave our human station in order to survey it from a distance. 'Roman theology' unmistakably leaves the impression that a certain scholastic way of formulating and expressing the truth is the only means whereby the truth remains true, whereas all other expressions of the truth would be 'pastoral', implying a diminished embodiment of the truth. This inevitably means that pastoral theology is identified with 'diluted theology' (a point of view which is encouraged by some second-rate publications.) They do not seem to understand that expressing the truth in itself should reveal its pastoral character, that its pastoral character is not just a 'pious appendage' to an essentialist-abstract truth which as such is non-pastoral. For surely a Council is in its essence pastoral; a Council does not acquire this pastoral character merely as a result of a positive desire or a consideration of policy on the part of a certain Pope. John XXIII's desire has not given this Council its own pastoral context, which other Councils might not have had; he has pointed to a fundamental aspect of every Council, for the presentation of a saving

truth is an intrinsically pastoral activity, the pastoral activity of the doctrinal authority itself.

So it is very healthy that there are elements from the other side in the Council, who are sounding a note of warning against a pragmatic conception of truth. But it ought not to remain the prerogative of the 'conservative' wing alone to sound this note. It is a real and fundamental aspect of a true pastoral objective to regard the truth as a saving force. But the truth must be considered in a non-essentialist sense. It seems not impossible to me that the 'conservative' wing, by a healthy insistence on the truth as a pastoral value, wants to inflict its essentialism as well on the council fathers. This would be fatal for the Church in our time, a Church that would continue to speak a language that would no longer be understood by anyone except those leading insular existences, quite unaware of what is going on in our world.

For there is a persistent belief that 'speaking in modern terms' entails speaking in old-fashioned language twenty-five years hence. So it does, since truth only emerges in a given historical situation. But to some people this assertion apparently conveys the illusion that there is, somewhere, a 'timeless language' which would never date; and this would simply boil down to the unspoken assertion that a definite moment in history (conditioned by history) and therefore a mere phase in history, a moment which by comparison with a previous moment was itself described as using modern language, is superimposed as a model beyond time and space for the entire subsequent evolution of the Church. Even if this were true (up to a point at any rate) to my mind it would in any case only apply to the phase which we call the primitive apostolic age, with its scripture, which still provides the universal exemplar. To refer back to a certain snapshot of Church history—even one taken at a peak period, as for instance the age of scholasticism—and posit it as a norm for all further insight into the truth is in fact a form of relativism 'maintaining the absolute truth', because it means that a relatively successful theological synthesis—and every human achievement is relative in this sense—leads to rejection of every new synthesis.

The fact that today's modern language is 'dated' tomorrow simply implies that expressing the truth is a never-ending task which has to be begun anew all the time, but it is quite out of the question that one could ever hope to promote a certain historical interpretation to the status of a timeless statement that could of itself provide an absolute formulation of the faith. This would mean pinning the truth through the heart instead of rescuing it, as we intended, from the tumultuous

actuality of human life. This, it seems to me, is the painful mistake people make who think the Church 'must speak its own language' (which it must), but who then identify that language with one particular phase of the perennially new language of revelation. The Catholic Church must undoubtedly speak its own language, and it should not, in the name of eirenism, speak a language alien to it. But the Church's own language is the ever-changing language of the people, only cast in the idiom of the one revelation and also, as a negative norm, in the language of the Bible. It is surely significant that St Thomas (who in his own time so boldly used 'modern language' in his theology) nevertheless says at a certain moment: 'We should not lightly abandon the language of the scriptures' (*de divinis non de facile debet homo aliter loqui quam s.scriptura loquatur, Contra Errores Graecorum, c.1.*).

The Question of the Language.—Up till now we have discussed the deeper sense of the word 'language'. The question of language in its usual sense, of terminology in fact, is nevertheless closely linked with this. And in this sense Latin is quite often called the Church's own language. There are all kinds of historical reasons for this, and we ought not to underestimate its proven value. And I happily concede that the use of Latin has been a blessing during the Council, not because the language was Latin, but because Latin was the only language which was understood and to some extent spoken by all. The same could equally have been said of, for instance, either English or Italian, if either of these languages had been understood and spoken by all the council fathers. So it is not really a question of Latin as such, but of one language which is actually understood by all, so that there is less likelihood of misconstruing each other's words in dubious translations.

And yet it is typical that some see advantages not simply in Latin as a practical universal language, but in Latin *an sich*, and more particularly as a 'dead language' which no longer develops spontaneously (except in *artefacta* or artificial neologisms). They are convinced that a 'dead language' is best suited to render the unchanging truth. Apart from the implications that the 'unchanging truth' is a 'dead thing,' if it can so readily be formulated in 'dead terms', this assertion once again reveals a trace of an essentialistic interpretation of truth, which is as erroneous as the relativism in some modern trends. In our human thinking we must surely make a distinction between 'the truth as such' and the 'truth as known and believed by man', so that absolute values in our knowledge are safeguarded by the inner (if you like, objective) tendency

of our relative, incomplete vision of reality which provides continuity between all our imperfect interpretations of the truth. It is precisely by focussing on the truth or reality from ever-changing positions that we safeguard an increasingly clear perspective of the truth, and that is why 'progressiveness' is a prerequisite if the fullness of truth is to be allowed the free scope that is its due. Conservatism, therefore, defined as adherence to one particular account of the truth (as if this were all-embracing), is by definition a violation of the truth itself.

We do not pretend that the newness offers safeguards because it is new. Neither the old nor the new as such can be safeguards of the truth. But a new point of view, a new sensitivity to its own environment—however much untruths may insinuate themselves, just as untruths also gain access to truths handed down of old—at least throws a new light on a truth and offers a new insight into a truth not previously discerned, or at any rate not formulated. And then it is quite possible that a 'dead language', which does not grow with the new sensitivity to the environment (for that is why it is dead), is *ipso facto* incapable of integrating the new aspects of reality—except quite artificially, and hence falsely, sometimes even dangerously so. A dead language is obviously suited to the formulation of those aspects which humanity had discovered at the time that this language was still a living instrument of their thought.⁶ And it is just because of this that a dead language can quite naturally produce conservatism. Not that it enshrouds an untruth, but it enshrines a germ of truth in such a way that all further growth in understanding is seen as an accidental extrinsic addition, and thus by sealing off an element of truth which was discovered long ago (and still remains valid) it places it in a false twilight. Or take the expression: 'essence is like *number*'. Every addition or subtraction makes it into a different number and so destroys the first 'essence'. Hence each new understanding of the truth leaves the old understanding essentially untouched, and is therefore merely a chance accretion, otherwise the first understanding would be destroyed. I often found during the council debates that the 'progressives' were only fighting against this sterilisation of the truth, while the others thought that they were attacking the essential truth within. And so there was righteous indignation on both sides. This, to me, was more than sufficient—and

⁶This is, of course, a consideration of only one aspect of the use of the Latin language. A wider consideration of this problem would bring many other aspects to light, placing the 'one-sidedness' of what I am saying here in a truer perspective. My objections apply mainly to the *exclusive* use of Latin in theology.

painful—proof of how the bias of pure conceptualism (which goes hand in hand with essentialism) can hamper fruitful council debates between the ‘open’ and ‘closed wings’ and cause all manner of suspicion. Of course the ‘open wing’ is just as much concerned about the truth. It was extraordinary how one newspaper spoke of the ‘orthodox or conservative group’ as against the ‘supporters of the open group’ implying that the latter were not worried about the orthodoxy of the faith and unaware of the biblical assertion: ‘the truth will set you free’.

Truth as Possession and Growing Truth.—Cardinal Ottaviani, in an interview with a journalist of *La France catholique*, said quite rightly: ‘Theology today is in a ferment, and there is a great deal that is by no means ready yet; nothing should be included in a dogmatic constitution that is not yet ripe’. I fully agree with this. But it is another matter whether a fossilised truth (which, I repeat, in so far as it is part truth, is true and remains true) still appears in a true light in our time, when it is presented with all its original circumscription. Here, I thought, lies a deep-rooted misunderstanding. Whatever earlier Councils, Trent and Vatican I, for instance, decided dogmatically rightly remains (now and in a hundred years’ time) a norm for the Catholic faith. But a complementary truth passed over in silence perhaps at Trent, because of reaction or simply because this truth was not a matter of controversy, might well imply a more important and from a religious point of view more valuable aspect of truth than what Trent decided. Moreover the Tridentine aspect of truth might reveal its uniquely Catholic significance only within the totality of this complementary religious truth. Surely then it is a concrete ‘untruth’ to go on repeating and re-affirming this Tridentine aspect, while concealing again the complementary truth: Consciously stating a part truth outside its totality always threatens to make it a heresy, an excision. It is quite possible to place a truth in an untrue light. To prevent this was often the sincere intention of the so-called ‘open’ wing, who were blamed for being in league with non-Catholic Christians, and for concealing truth from this motive. At this Council the Church finally broke with her counter-reformation attitude of mind, but not with her catholicity. And this is where the tragic misunderstanding arose in connection with the so-called ‘two sources’ of revelation. Admittedly the ‘progressive wing’ was at times compromised by what was written on all sides in inferior publications in the way of biased comments on various questions. But the pre-war crisis of Modernism should have taught us that all who used so-called

modernist terms (for instance 'collective religious experience', said of the Church) did not necessarily interpret these in a modernist sense. And yet the judgement of Modernism was passed on unorthodox as well as orthodox. The Church should beware of repeating such painful mistakes.

The Basic Conflict.—That Pope John XXIII should state that this Council must not re-affirm what has formerly been decided seems to have been an intuition on the part of a man who, especially through his priestly feeling for pastoral care, helped by his attitude of mind as a historian, is particularly sensitive to the complementary aspects of a particular truth. Truth as a human 'possession' is never outside time and place. A denial of this (making one interpretation of truth absolute) betrays its fatal effect in what we have called essentialist thinking. This, I maintain, is the basic conflict that came to the surface during the first phase of the Council. The misunderstandings surrounding the ecumenical and pastoral attitudes of the Council are merely the outcome of it. And I trust that I am not exposing myself to the reproach of denying the value of human concepts.

If people would think all this over carefully I would be in complete agreement with Professor Tromp when he says: 'I am hopeful that both sides will grow nearer together, that they will have a better understanding of each other and that they will find that their viewpoints are not as widely separated as they thought' (*loc. cit.*). Nevertheless I think that those beyond the Alps first need to understand what we mean when we attack the 'essentialist way of thinking' and that those on this side of the Alps should with a good grace learn to accept the sincere anxiety of 'Roman theology' to preserve the faith in its pure form. I fully recognize that the Church has need of a body which (at any rate by helping the Church's teaching authority, the college of bishops, headed by the Pope) is concerned with the *particular* care (I say particular, for every believer has this duty) of preserving the faith intact. But this purity does not only, not even primarily, demand the maintenance of what at one time has been dogmatically stated, but an increasingly shaded integration of what has been defined in the balanced totality of the faith. Without this it is impossible to keep the faith pure, because people will become obsessed with a part truth to the detriment of the whole.

If this remains the aim, the second phase of the Council will not be characterised by a schema *de fide pure custodiendo* (for keeping the faith

pure is the implicit if not explicit premise of all of us) but by the truthful schema *de fide vitaliter custodiendo*—how can we in this age keep the true faith *alive*? Then the rugged back of the Alps will indeed have been broken.

Holy, Holy, Holy

CORNELIUS ERNST, O.P.

I

(a)

There was life outside the Church. There was much that the Church did not include. He thought of God, and of the whole blue rotunda of the day. That was something great and free. He thought of the ruins of the Grecian worship, and it seemed, a temple was never perfectly a temple, till it was ruined and mixed up with the winds and the sky and the herbs. (D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, Phoenix edn., p. 203).

Will Brangwen has taken his wife Anna to Lincoln Cathedral, which is described with a surcharged sensuous religiosity through Brangwen's eyes. But Anna resists the 'dazed swoon' of the cathedral: she wants freedom, open space, she brings the cutting edge of her separate individuality to bear on Brangwen's passionate intercourse with the cathedral. Brangwen is bitterly angry, hurt, disillusioned; he has lost his absolute, he sees his cathedrals now as 'a world within a world, a sort of sideshow, whereas before they had been as a world to him within a chaos.'

(b)

An architectural work, a Greek temple, represents nothing, images nothing; it simply stands there in the valley's rocky cleft. The building encloses the form of the god, contains it and yet allows it to emerge from this containment to stand forth in the sacred precinct through the open colonnade. Through the temple the god makes