

The Council Resumes

673

by Henry St John, O.P.

By the time these words are in print the Vatican Council will be about to enter on its fourth, and presumably last, session. Undoubtedly this session will be an important one, its decisions are likely to make or mar the full realization of all its previous work. Pope John had two principal aims in calling together Vatican II. The first was the renewal of the inner life of the Church. A striking manifestation of such renewal would reveal its native truth and splendour to the world, not in pomp and pageantry, but in humble service of mankind. That native truth and splendour have been too often obscured by the slow unrecognized pressures of history, and by human limitation and failings. Their remedy, by sincere self examination, would enable the Church's eternal message to penetrate the world it lives in more acceptably. The progressively widening divorce of world from church might then, in some measure at least, be narrowed and bridged.

The second aim, equally important, but subsidiary to the first, was to promote by a change of heart and mind the unity of all Christians in the one Church, as Christ the Lord wills it and designs it to be. These two aims were of course intimately connected in Pope John's mind, though no doubt he himself learned much, during his short pontificate, of what this first step, so clearly indicated to him, would ultimately involve.

In his recent book¹ Mr Hales has done much to clarify these two aims of the late Pope and how they formed themselves in his mind. Many estimates have been made of his personality, character and the source of his extraordinary impact on the modern world. These picture on one side, a benign, lovable, shrewd parish priest, nourished by 'Garden of the Soul' spirituality and rather bewildered by the forces he had set in motion; on the other, a political genius of penetrating insight and wide understanding of men, who deliberately set out to free the Church from the bondage of its siege mentality. The truth, as Mr Hales succeeds in showing, lay somewhere about mid-way between these two extremes. John XXIII was at least a near-saint, and his *Giornale dell'Anima* shows that his strict religious self-discipline did not stifle but, rather, fostered his love for his fellow-men, and grace worked with experience to make him uniquely and widely a lover of God, and of mankind in general in God. In Mr Hales' own words 'the difference between him and them

¹*Pope John and his Revolution* by E. E. Y. Hales. Eyre and Spottiswoode 1965.

(his predecessors as Pope) was that he accepted and welcomed the modern world (as a working partnership, not in the sense of accepting its beliefs) and they did not, they mostly censured and rebuked it, frequently and sometimes even angrily. . . . He did not allow himself to become pre-occupied, as Popes Pius IX, X, XI and XII did, with the "advance of error" or the "evils of the age". His reluctance to criticize or condemn was matched by his lively interest in every sort of person and every sort of undertaking'. (p. 5.)

Mr Hales traces this spirit at work throughout Pope John's short reign. His concern and urgent desire for Christian unity was that it might be a means towards the unity of the whole human race, which he saw as a vast potential for union in Christ's Body. This was the subject matter of his two great and rather unconventional encyclicals, *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in terris*. These showed that his wide mindedness embraced all mankind; he published them at a point of time when conventional Catholic Italian politics judged them adversely, as aiding and comforting the enemy, Italian communism. Mr Hales thus sums it up. 'There is implicit in Pope John's teaching and in his policies a concept of "working with the enemy", of ignoring not only party labels, but even religious and philosophical differences, in the mutual pursuit of the useful and the good, which was novel to Italian clerical thought and which, while it lasted, provided Italy with a political experience she had only previously enjoyed under Benedict XV' (p. 190). This was Pope John's ecumenism carried to its logical and theological conclusion.

The third session of Vatican II had ended in a wave of disappointment and apprehension. For a time the memory of the triumphant passage of the Constitutions *de Sacra Liturgia*, *de Ecclesia*, *de Ecclesiis Orientalibus Catholicis* and the Decree *de Ecumenismo* was almost blotted out in the stir caused by what many considered the enigmatic actions of Pope Paul. He had refused to intervene against the move to postpone, to the fourth session, the trial vote on the Declaration on Religious Liberty, and he had intervened *motu proprio*, at the last moment, to make nineteen personal alterations in the Decree *de Ecumenismo*. These actions caused considerable tension at the time, and this was increased by the withdrawal for revision of the declaration on the Jews, which was causing some unrest in Arab countries and among Arab Christians. Tension of this kind tends to magnify lesser incidents out of proportion to their real significance.

The case for the postponement of the Religious Liberty declaration was reasonably strong. It has been considerably altered in re-drafting and time was needed for more consideration. The delay was not altogether motivated by dislike of the content of the declaration itself. Cardinal Heenan has explained the circumstances with considerable

authority.² He was chairman of one of the sub-committees which did the re-drafting of the original declaration – Fr Courtney Murray, S.J., one of the chief architects of this declaration was a member of the same sub-committee. A few days after the close of the Council he said that, on reflection, he saw the wisdom of the postponement of the immediate trial vote.

The Pope's personal intervention in the Decree *de Ecumenismo* is much more difficult to understand. Dr McAfee Brown, an acute, sympathetic and fair minded Protestant Observer has said that most of the changes were unimportant, but that one had important implications for ecumenism. Writing in December *Commonweal* last December he noted that the original statement that the separated brethren *find* God in Jesus Christ, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit in Scripture, was deleted and the statement substituted that they *seek* God in this way. He comments that the difference between *seeking* and *finding* is a pretty monumental one, and the new wording can only be interpreted to mean a belief, on the part of the Catholic Church, that Protestants seek but do not find.³

This judgment must be a hasty leap to a conclusion under stress of emotion, for it could not possibly be the meaning of the change. The whole Decree is an emphatic affirmation that baptized, though separated, Christians can and do have true and genuine faith in Jesus Christ, which puts them in the way of salvation. The most likely interpretation of the change is that not even Catholics, who believe that the fullness of the means of truth and grace are accessible to them in the Church, invariably accept the movement of the Holy Spirit and find Jesus Christ; if and when they do, it is because they seek him under the impulse of that movement. So, too, it is with separated Christians. The substituted word *seek* is theologically more correct in each case. Fr Charles Boyer has discussed this point at some length and has remarked that there is nothing at all offensive in the text, and it would have caused no difficulty had it been present in the original draft.⁴

What is more difficult to counter is Dr McAfee Brown's contention, in the *Commonweal* article quoted above, that this intervention by the Pope compelled the Council Fathers to accept the nineteen changes without any chance to discuss or debate them. On this single occasion, contrary to precedent, their activity as a deliberative assembly went by the board, and they were given the opportunity to be no more than a rubber stamp assembly, and to accept without debate or discussion changes in the text they had already provisionally approved. Yet none of the changes seems to have had any major importance, even the one cited by Dr McAfee Brown. The incident remains enigmatic; to many the

²*Unity and Peace* – The Burge Memorial Lecture, by Cardinal J. C. Heenan. S.C.M. Press, 1965, p. 17.

³'Apprehensions about the Council' in *Commonweal*, December 25, 1964, p. 443.

⁴*Unitas*, Winter 1964, p. 253 and Spring 1965, p. 27.

recent promulgation of the doctrine of the 'collegiality' of the bishops in the Constitution *de Ecclesia* appeared to have been treated somewhat cavalierly, however unimportant the changes made may have been.

Later in the same article the contention of unilateral action by the Pope, inimical to the doctrine of 'collegiality', is extended to the proclamation of Our Lady as 'Mother of the Church'. It is maintained that not only was this action unilateral, but that it did not even reflect a consensus among the bishops that the Pope was articulating. It is claimed that many Council Fathers had serious reservations about applying the title 'Mother of the Church' to Mary, either for theological or ecumenical reasons. But this proclamation was in no sense a defining of doctrine, such as is the rightful function of bishops assembled in Council in union with their chief Bishop. There was even a precedent, and something of a parallel for it, in Pope John's placing of St Joseph after Our Lady in the list of saints in the canon of the Latin Mass. What Pope Paul did was simply a practical, devotional application of the doctrine already elaborated by the bishops in the section on our Lady in the Constitution *de Ecclesia*.

There our Lady's part in the redemption, of which Christ the Lord is the entirely unique mediator, is clearly elucidated, and the sense of our Lady's titles, Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix, Mediatrix,⁵ carefully explained. It is noteworthy that the title 'co-Redemptrix' is passed over unmentioned. The title 'Mother of the Church' is a simple, homely one, easily understood. Mary has been Mother of God, Mother of Christ, the second Eve, Mother of the Faithful, Mother of all mankind in the new Creation, from the earliest ages. Could it not be that in proclaiming for her this simple and homely title, rooted in Scripture and Tradition, the Pope was paving the way for the lapse into disuse of some other titles commonly given her, which are fraught with the danger of theological misunderstanding and exaggeration? Pope Paul's action may have been ecumenically inexpedient in the eyes of some of the bishops, but it can hardly be seen as a further exaltation of our Lady, or as theologically unsound; rather it is a way of expressing in prayer the theological place that the Constitution *de Ecclesia* so excellently assigns to her in the scheme of redemption, and so a step forward on the road to our reconciliation, on this point, with our separated brethren.

There can be no doubt however that the elaboration in the Constitution *de Ecclesia* of the doctrine of 'collegiality' lies at the centre of what the new ecclesiology of the two documents *de Ecclesia* and *de Ecumenismo* has to say about the Church's structure. This is of the greatest importance in the promotion of Christian unity. Yet so far it is only on paper and has not been translated into practice in any formal way. Moreover, in its setting out, in *de Ecclesia*, there is an unanswered question, a question

⁵*The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*. Catholic Truth Society, § 62, p. 83.

that of its nature can only be answered fully, in practice. As Dr McAfee Brown puts it, 'What would happen if the Pope and the bishops were to disagree about some area of teaching?' The opposition between Pope and bishops might be on the ground of the expediency of a definition, not on that of its truth. This was the position at Vatican I when a number of bishops left Rome rather than vote *non-placet* on the Constitution *Pastor Aeternus*, though all ultimately accepted it. What would be the position in a situation where the opposition to the Pope concerned the truth of a dogma to be defined? This has never, historically, been put to the test.

The question is not one to be considered from a purely juridical point of view, in the sense that there must be or ought to be safeguards, laid down in laws or regulations, to deal with such a situation were it to arise. The answer to this question that Dr McAfee Brown got from his *periti* friends in Rome was a sound one; it is inconceivable that such a situation would arise. If a significant difference of opinion developed, the Pope, rather than override the convictions of the bishops, would leave the matter open for further thought and maturity, realizing that the time was not yet ripe. This is a principle to be seen at work all through the deliberations of Vatican II, in its commissions and in all its sessions.

There is therefore no juridical machinery to compel the Pope to make 'collegiality', elucidated and confirmed by the Constitution *de Ecclesia*, effective in the Church. There is however a very strong moral obligation to do so, and in the end, as we believe, Christianity and the Church are motivated and energized by moral considerations, to which law is no more than ancillary. It follows that 'collegiality' will in fact be implemented and made effective, though the first steps towards this may be slow. It is this slowness that gives rise to the friendly apprehensions Dr McAfee Brown has voiced in his *Commonweal* article, and these or similar apprehensions are to be found on the Catholic side as well.

It is worth recalling therefore that first before his article was published the Pope had sent out to the bishops of the world a letter dated December 18 on 'Collegiality'.⁶ In it he speaks of its authoritative proclamation as providential for our times, discordant and confused as they are in the doctrinal field. It makes for a unity strong with the eternal bonds of faith, love and discipline, which bind together the episcopal order and the holy People of God. The Pope went on to speak of the numerous benefits that would accrue to the Church from this 'collegial' bond, confirmed by the Council. One such effect, he said, was that each of us bishops should feel responsible for the good of all; that was a necessity for the Church.⁷ It is significant that the Pope speaks throughout this letter to his colleagues in the episcopal college with a 'we' that is not papal, but

⁶This letter was not made public till the May 1, 1965, issue of *Civiltà Cattolica*.
⁷*The Tablet*, May 15, 1965, p. 559.

means 'we bishops'.

Not long after his election to the papacy Paul VI spoke to the Curia of its reform and he has not since been silent on this subject, though nothing has yet been done. It would seem, too, that changes have been initiated, which might be the beginning of an evolution destined in time to transform the College of Cardinals into a Senate, consisting mainly of pastoral bishops, who would be his assessors in carrying out the work of Peter's successor. These are slight indications of change, they are not necessarily signs of hesitancy or dragging of feet, but perhaps of wise deliberation in making bold and radical changes for the adaptation of the Church to new and challenging situations in a manner that will accomplish them without undue disruptions.

The development of 'collegiality' may be a long and far-reaching process. The major pressure in bringing it about will almost certainly come from closer relations, increasing understanding and deepening sympathy, through ecumenical dialogue, with the Orthodox Churches. Their development in history has been from very early times a moderate centralization of local episcopacy into patriarchates. Ours in the Latin West has been a much more vigorous centralization brought about by resistance to the secular power. The functions of the Western Patriarchate of Rome became in this process absorbed into and identified with the universal leadership, by Christ's appointment, of Peter's successor over the whole Church. Thus by an accident of history the Bishop of Rome as Patriarch of the West and the Bishop of Rome as Pope became identified, and the patriarchate as a separate and distinct function, in practice, disappeared. It was this merger that led to much of the friction between East and West that ultimately resulted in schism.

The East has never had this merged jurisdiction because of its separate patriarchal structure. For them diocese and patriarchate come first and are immediate and perceptible in day-to-day life. The See of Rome lay far in the background. It was acknowledged, vaguely perhaps, and from time to time, as an ultimate court of appeal in matters both of doctrine and discipline. So things stood as the schism between East and West hardened into relative permanency in the eleventh century. The union of Florence in 1439 was achieved on the basis of this conception of ecclesiological structure. Had it been permanent, the shape of the Church would have been markedly altered but not the substance of its doctrine as later defined, though its balance might well have been different.

Had, *per impossibile*, the Turkish invasion receded, had Constantinople never fallen, had the Greeks or the Russians discovered the Americas, had Catholic reform swept through Europe a century earlier and left no cause for the Reformation, the whole Church might have been radically different from the present lop-sidedness in rite, ethos and reli-

gious culture. The papacy would still have been there, in substance unaltered, with a revived Western patriarchate, reduced in size but still holding the universal primacy of Peter. It might well have been surrounded by a variegated group of many rites and languages each with its distinctive ethos and culture, and many new patriarchates. That is a phantasy based on the 'ifs' of history, but it illustrates what is essential and what accidental in the Church's structure and practice, as Catholics conceive it. It is not to be thought of that the great Eastern Church will return to the unity severed by schism, except upon the *status quo ante* of Florence, and the unifying principle will be the 'collegiality' of the Constitution *de Ecclesia* worked out in practice and grown to maturity.⁸

In the actuality of things as they are, the Reformation and its consequences are integral to the ecumenical dialogue. Here it would seem that the Anglican Communion has an important part to play. It is a microcosm of divided Christendom, and has returned and holds important the principle and framework of episcopacy, though the fullness of the sacramentality of this institution, as the Church of England has perpetuated it, is still in question by historic Christendom. In its work for unity the Anglican Communion labours to restore to divided Reformation Christianity this framework, together with much, as the Decree *de Ecumenismo* notes⁹ of Catholic traditions and structure. 'Collegiality' therefore, as it is elucidated in the Constitution *de Ecclesia*, is a crucial point in the progress of Christian unity through the ecumenical dialogue.

There are other points of comparable importance of which only two can be briefly indicated here. The first is the place occupied by the concept of communion as the basic element in the nature of the Church, as Christ has willed it to be. This element is primary in Eastern thought about the Church. With us in the West it has become overshadowed, owing to particular pressures of history, by hierarchical structure. The East begins with the Bishop and the local Church's common life and works outwards, in thought, to the Churches total structure. We, in the past and even as lately as the great encyclical of Pius XII *Mystici Corporis*, have tended to start from the top, from hierarchical structure and work inwards. The result has been clericalization of the Body of Christ, and neglect of the priesthood of the laity, and as consequence a lowering of the inner life of the Church's members by failure to regard them as first-class citizens of God's City. The Constitution *de Ecclesia* is designed to redress this imbalance by giving us a full theology of the Church as the People of God. The local Church united with its Bishop, and he in union with all the bishops of the *Catholica*; this basic unit contains the wholeness of the Body of Christ, all the gifts divinely given for us men and for our salvation. These ecclesial gifts constitute the

⁸An interesting and illuminating article, by the Abbot of Downside, 'The Constitution on the Church and Christian Reunion' deals at some length with this point. *Downside Review*, April 1965.

⁹Cap. III, § 13.

fullness or perfection of communion, which is the mark of the true Church. The hierarchical structure safeguards the totality of the gifts in each local unit within the *Catholica*, from its centre, the bishop, outwards to every other local unit under its bishop, and thence upwards to the keystone of the arch of authority, the Bishop of Rome. Each bishop sharing responsibility for the whole in union with and under the leadership of Peter's successor; this, is 'collegiality' in practice.

By this standard the status and relation of baptized Christians, separated from the communion of the Church through no fault of their own, must henceforth be estimated in the light of the Decree *de Ecumenismo*. In the new ecclesiology they are not seen merely as individuals, but as members of separated bodies, which are none the less Churches or Ecclesial Communities' sharing the Church's communion, though in a sense less than perfect, yet giving access to the way of salvation. They retain, through baptism, the invisible life of grace, the virtues of faith, hope and charity and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Of visible means or occasions of truth and grace-life all possess at least the Scriptures, God's Word to which true faith can respond, many have baptism and other liturgical actions of a sacramental nature which, even when invalid by Catholic standards can be acts of obedient faith and occasions of grace.¹⁰ So long as sincere conscience bids our separated brethren to remain faithful in allegiance to their own Churches, they can do no other. As Cardinal Bea has said 'We should be joyfully ready to help them to make their own religious life effective, and to let them have every possible assistance from our pastoral experience'.¹¹ God is not tied to his own ordained means of grace. He cares and makes provision for all men of good will.

Christ our Lord, in his Church, by the power of the Holy Spirit, reaches beyond the visible boundaries of his Church, beyond the separated churches, to the whole world, religions in a variety of differing ways or without explicit profession of religion. The opening words of the Constitution *de Ecclesia* are 'Christ is the Light of the Gentiles' and it goes on, 'The Church is the sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of unity for the whole human race'.¹² Later on we read, 'There are men who are in ignorance of Christ's gospel and of his Church, through no fault of their own, and who search for God in sincerity of heart; they attempt to put into practice the recognition of his will that they have reached through the dictate of conscience. They do so under the influence of divine grace, they can attain everlasting salvation. Nor does divine Providence deny the necessary helps to salvation to men who through no fault of their own have not yet reached an express

¹⁰*De Ecumenismo*, Cap I, §3.

¹¹*Christian Unity – A Catholic View*. Sheed & Ward, Stag Book, 1962, p. 188.

¹²*De Eccl.* Cap I, § 1.

acknowledgment of God'.¹³

All that has been done and will be done in the Council to show the potential of the Church of Christ to be the whole human race underlines how vitally important it is that the Church should finally turn its back on the old and one-sided view that error has no rights. It must acknowledge in practice the inviolability of human conscience, as an inherent human right, by passing the Declaration on Religious Liberty. Dr. McAfee Brown, in his *Commonweal* article, several times quoted already, speaks for all non-Roman Catholics, when he writes 'It cannot be said too often or too unequivocally that failure by the Council Fathers to adopt the religious liberty statement would be a disaster for the Ecumenical Movement. We have Cardinal Heenan's word for it that the Declaration will be voted on and passed in the coming session and that it is now an extremely good document.'¹⁴

The Vatican Council, soon to be resumed in a fourth session, will at least complete the preparation of a fertile seed-bed, in which many valuable seeds of reform and renewal have been successfully planted. But seeds may die unless diligently cared for. That they may flourish and produce good fruit will need a long, arduous period of cultivation and growth, a steady coming together of all of us, Christians separated from each other. An encounter and dialogue, in joint prayer, in Bible study in common, in eirenic theological discussion at many levels, in works of charity together in sympathy and understanding, in dealing truthfully with one another in love. The Union of all Christians is no doubt a long way off, but unity in Christ exists already, and the vitally important thing is that it should continue to deepen and gather strength. That we should grow together in spite of our differences, and be one in heart, before we can be one in mind.

¹³*De Eccl. Cap. 2, § 16.*

¹⁴*Unity and Peace* – The Burge Memorial Lecture, by Cardinal J. C. Heenan, p. 18.
