

Vatican II and Us

by Kevin Kelly

We, the People of God, are the Church

Our Church Theology today sees the Church as far more than an administrative structure, functioning along hierarchical lines. The bishops at Vatican II very deliberately put the “people of God” before the hierarchical structure of the Church. “We are church” sums up a fundamental theological truth which has within it the power to energise a movement for renewal in the Church. There are far-reaching implications. To take but one example, it moves us to go beyond any tendency to regard women as minor partners in that “we”. It has moved many women among us to take their rightful place within the important work of theological reflection within the Church.

Our Eucharist In the light of eucharistic theology today, no longer do we see ourselves as attending the priest’s Mass. The ministry of the Eucharistic celebrant is precisely to enable us all to share together in our community Mass. People-participation has a much higher priority than observing rubrics.

Our Parish A parish is a community with a mission. People and priest, we all share responsibility for the life of the parish community and its mission. Such co-responsibility should flow naturally into collaborative ministry. A primary role of the priest should be to encourage and enable each of us to undertake *our* share in the work and mission of the parish. We are not just “helping Father”! As a wise priest one said: “Collaboration is not a way of doing something more efficiently; it is a way of being church more authentically”.

Our Bible The Bible is no longer a closed book reserved to experts. God’s Word is given to us all to inspire our lives. The aim of good Bible scholarship should be to help us read the Bible for ourselves – intelligently and faithfully. Intelligently: recognising the text as written by believers in a specific historical context; faithfully: bridging the gap between that context and our own times. Making the text our own frees us from a fundamentalist slavery to a dead letter, devoid of any living context. In that way we can be enriched and challenged by the faith of our forebears while recognising that our world today and the problems we face are very different to theirs.

Our experience Theology involves “making faith-sense of experience and experience-sense of faith” (Jack Mahoney SJ). That is why it takes human experience seriously, as the bishops did at Vatican II. Most of us are not professional theologians, but our experience is still theologically important. For instance, if very many Catholics today say that the Church’s official teaching on contraception does not speak to their own experience, they are not being theologically ignorant. They may, in fact, be making an important theological statement that needs to be listened to.

Our teaching authority The Church is not made up of teachers and learners. The Church as a whole is a learning Church and a teaching Church. Theologians are still exploring the implications of the Vatican II statement that the whole Church has a share in the charism of infallibility. The Pope and the bishops have the role of speaking authoritatively in the name of the Church, but the real author of such teaching is God. That is where the rest of us have a role to play. In receiving such teaching we “own” it as God’s teaching. In some instances the Church as a whole may feel unable to “own”

a specific piece of teaching as presently promulgated. It fails to make experience-sense of their faith and faith-sense of their experience. At times God's spirit can be even more active in this process of non-reception than in the process of reception. In such instances non-reception, sometimes misleadingly referred to as "dissent", should be seen as loyal and faithful co-operation in the teaching ministry of the Church and needs to be listened to respectfully by the Pope and bishops in exercising their teaching authority.

Our ecumenical sisters and brothers As Pope John Paul II pointed out in *Ut unum sint* (1995) we are not faithful Roman Catholics if we do not take ecumenism seriously. That means accepting that God's spirit is truly present and active in other Christian churches. The full implications of this still need to be further explored, as Pope John Paul II admitted when he invited other Christian churches to discern with him how best the role of primacy should be exercised to promote communion between all Christians. As Christians we all share in the one baptism which makes us members of the one body of Christ.

International ecumenical commissions like ARCIC have laboured hard to produce agreed statements which have gone beyond mere words. They are the fruit of a growing together in faith through the lived experience of their members. Moreover, the experience of growing together in faith has not been limited to the members of such commissions. For instance, the experience of many ordinary Church members has convinced them that the present ruling on intercommunion fails to make faith-sense of their experience or experience-sense of their faith. This was brought out very simply but powerfully in a very moving story related in the L'Arche communities comment on *One Bread, One Body*. In an ecumenical community the response of one of the disabled non-Catholic residents when refused Communion by the priest was a simple "Don't be silly, Jack." "Out of the mouths...!"

Our One World Vatican II defined the Church as "a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humanity" (*Lumen Gentium*, n.1.). This means that we cannot claim to be Christians and opt out of responsibility for our world. In fact, the bishops went even further: "The split between the faith they profess and the daily lives of many people is to be counted as among the more serious misconceptions of the day....Christians who neglect their temporal duties are neglecting their duties to their neighbour and even to God and are endangering their eternal salvation." (*Gaudium et Spes*, n.43)

At the 1971 post-Vatican II Synod on Justice the bishops expressed the same truth in a more positive way. They said that working for justice and peace was an integral element of preaching the Gospel: Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation." Certainly, post-Vatican II theology rejects a purely 'churchy' Christianity. And now ecological and environmental issues are also accepted as an integral part of the redemptive and liberation agenda.

This is a shortened version of a talk given to the Manchester and North Cheshire Circle in June 2013.