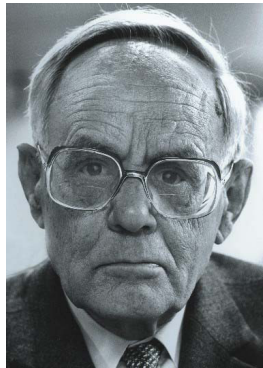


What Happened to Vatican 2?

This year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the opening of the 2nd Vatican Council. For many this event is now as distant a part of history as the 2nd World war or the launch of the National Health Service, but at the time it was an event of worldwide significance.

Let me come at this by way of personal memories. I was then a newly ordained Anglican priest, working away as a curate on the bleak North Hull Housing Estate but about to leave to become a member of staff at Cuddesdon theological college just outside Oxford. As an ecumenically-minded outsider, I can testify to the impact which the launching of this Council by Pope John 23rd had on us all. For a long time the Catholic Church had seemed like a walled fortress, secure in its own convictions. From a lofty perch it seemed to preach at a wicked world and at those other Christians who were considered to be schismatics or heretics.

But there were those of us who had become aware of stirrings in the background. Our studies of liturgy owed much to a new generation of Catholic liturgists and we knew that, in this area, reforms were already taking place. Of course the Mass was still in Latin, but now there was a strong move to involve the laity in the action of the Mass. Dialogue Masses were encouraged to ease congregations out of their private devotions and there had been the great revival of the Paschal liturgy. We read avidly of Abbé Godin's analysis of the religious state of France¹, his call to renewed mission, and of the Mission de France, which emerged from it. There was Abbé Michonneau bringing revolution to his city parish and the brave pioneering ministry of the priest workers.



Karl Rahner

Not all of this survived. Behind all this were theologians like Yves Congar, Karl Rahner and Henri du Lubac. They often skated on thin ice and sometimes were plunged into the waters, disciplined and silenced. Yet to many these seemed to present a compelling articulation of Catholic faith. Some of us were lucky enough to encounter this put into practice by those like a Belgian priest, Yves Nohl, who worked at the University Chaplaincy, a quiet pioneer of ecumenism. These stirrings helped us to see that, when John 23rd announced the Council, it was not simply a bolt from the blue. Pope John certainly allowed the cat to emerge from the bag. Elected as a nice old caretaker pope, a safe pair of hands to see the Church through, he was determined to throw open the gates of this fortress church, because looking out from the Vatican he saw "a world starving for peace". "Christ", he declared "has been on the cross with his arms outstretched for



Fr Peter Cornwell

2,000 years.” The task of the Church was not to sit in its fortress guarding this gospel treasure and speaking only words of rebuke and judgement to the world, but to find the words and ways to share its good news. Rather than lecturing from on high, it was to declare its solidarity with the people of our time. And, as he called together the bishops of the Catholic Church, he encouraged them to bring theological consultants, many of whom happily turned out to be precisely those pioneering theologians who, in Newman’s expression, had had “to fight under the lash”. That was to ensure that some spice was added to the mixture.

Even more spice was added by the generous welcome Pope John gave to invited observers from other Christian communities. These separated brothers could not of course speak on the floor of the Council but they had the most honoured of seats and, to their surprise, found that behind the scenes their advice was eagerly sought. I vividly remember how something of this inclusive spirit came to Oxford in the person of a young Swiss theologian Hans Küng. To a packed house in the examination schools this honoured guest of the University communicated something of Pope John’s vision.

Now I do not intend to attempt an exhaustive exposition of all the Council documents. I have those documents, I treasure them, I read and re-read them. In this country we were fortunate enough to have as a guide to the Council Christopher Butler, then Abbot of Downside and later to be Auxiliary Bishop in Westminster. As the newly-elected Abbot President of the English Benedictine Congregation Butler was a full member of the Council. He spoke often and he spoke effectively – not least assisted by his ease in speaking Latin rather better than most of the bishops. Afterwards he wrote not only expounding the teaching of the Council (notably “The Theology of Vatican 2”) but also a number of valuable personal reminiscences of workings of the council. Such memories revealed that not all was sweetness and light behind the scenes. Not all the fathers were enthused by this throwing-open of the city gates. Although the documents of the Council were passed with massive majorities, the opposition set to work in the background to persuade the Pope to apply the brakes. But this old man, knowing by now that his life was coming to an end, looked for the accelerator rather than the brake. The opposition strategically retreated, knowing that when it came to the implementation of the Council’s findings, this largely curial cabal could have more power. That is a story often told and told well - especially in the Jesuit John W. O’Malley’s “What happened at Vatican 2?”² and rather more dryly by the canonist Ladislav Orsy in “Receiving the Council”³.

From the Council documents emerge a coherent vision of the Catholic faith, of a faith generous, outward looking and inclusive rather than sectarian, enclosed and exclusive. At the heart of it all is the foundation conviction, the rock on which it is all built, the mystery of God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. He is “the sum total of revelation, God’s ‘last word’ ” so that we are to expect “no further public revelation”. But that Word made flesh in Jesus is so vast, so amazing, that we can only slowly take it in. So, teaches the Council, “the Holy Spirit constantly perfects faith by his gift so that revelation may be more and more perfectly understood.”

This theme, articulated in *Dei Verbum*, the Constitution on Divine Revelation, is taken up and expanded in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. That speaks of our responsibility to “read the signs of the times”, to interpret

what is going on in our world in the light of the gospel. We have to “discern in the events, the needs and the longings which it (the Church) shares with other people of our time, what may be genuine signs of the presence or of the purpose of God”.

The Church comes with its gospel, not simply as the teacher, but also as continuing pupil. Like all other human beings we have the absolute duty to sit at the feet of truth from wherever that truth comes. By our listening and learning we can grow in a deeper understanding of the gospel demands. So it has proved to be the case as we have slowly, all too slowly, come to recognise or may be beginning to recognise that religious persecution, slavery, child labour, indiscriminate warfare, the subjugation of women and homophobia are all evils measured by these demands.

In this vision of faith the Church is seen first as the People of God, “a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”. We do not start with structures of leadership or hierarchies but with the People, those living stones built to make up this new temple, the limbs of this body of Christ. This communion of people is one fashioned by our being drawn into the communion of God’s love – that is, the unity of the Church springs, not from Popes and Bishops, but from the unity of the Holy Trinity, of that giving and receiving of love which is the very life of God. So there is an equality of status of all members of the Church. “You”, insists Jesus, “must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi, since you have only one Master, and you are all brothers.” (Matthew 23). It was to make this shared responsibility a reality that the issue of the language arose. It must be such as to assist the people’s active participation.

Yes, the Church has an ordered life; it has its bishops, priests and deacons, to bring unity and shape to the common life and to hold us on course in our exploration of the unsearchable riches of Christ. This Catholic Church continues the ministry of Peter as leader of the apostles, the Rock which continues to affirm our common faith. “Thou art the Christ, the Son of God”, the Shepherd who holds together all this cultural and national diversity in the unity of love. But the leadership of this Bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter, must not reduce his fellow bishops to mere curates. They, the bishops, are not, insists the Council, “to be regarded as vicars of the Roman pontiff, for they exercise the powers which they possess in their own right.”

We are back again to Catholic unity in the service of world peace. So the Church, as sacrament of human unity, acts in the same way. Yes, unity is here, but now we must go out and seek that unity in our world. This is the big change of focus in our vision of catholicity. Instead of the exclusivity of the “top religious club” the shape and form of Catholicism exists to *include*. To this Catholic centre, declared the Council, in different ways “belong or are related the Catholic faithful, others who believe in Christ, finally all mankind called by God’s grace to salvation.”

In sections 15 and 16 of *Lumen Gentium* this embrace of relations and friends is spelt out in some detail. It starts with those fellow Christians not in communion with Rome, then moves to embrace “that people to which the covenants and promises were made and from which Christ was born according to the flesh” that is the Jewish people. Then come the Moslems who “also hold the faith of Abraham” and who “together with us adore the one merciful God” and then those of other faiths who “in shadows and images seek the unknown God”.

All this is a real deepening of the understanding of faith's embrace, which makes a great difference to the way we look out at our world. Instead of looking at it as a place of hostility and unremitting evil we are looking out for brothers and sisters, relations and friends. Along with evil in the world there is the continuing light of God's goodness. This is the Council capturing the vision of its leader, John 23rd.

The final council document, 'The Church in the Modern World', *Gaudium et Spes*, was cobbled together in haste to meet the deadline of the Council's closure. As Christopher Butler, who worked on it, admitted, it was not perfect; but without it, he insisted, the Council's message would be incomplete. They did not want to end in the sacristy, he said, but in the world, with a declaration of the Church's solidarity with suffering humanity. So there was that great opening: *"The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the peoples of our time, especially those who are poor and afflicted in any way, is the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts."* So the Church does not see itself as standing on a pedestal but declares its solidarity with the whole human family.

Such, in brief, is the Council's vision of an inclusive Catholicism. After 50 years it is worth asking how much of that vision has been translated into practice. John Henry Newman always made the point that the teachings of councils often take time to sink in. An international, multi-cultural, complex body like this moves like a vast oil tanker. But we can already see evidence of advance and perhaps too of some retreat. For the faithful, the most obvious difference which the Council made was in the liturgy, with the translations into the vernacular. Here was a great advance in the participation of the people. Its implementation was pretty brutal and there were casualties. Perhaps there were too many guitars and jolly jingles, too little care for the rich inheritance of Catholic music, those great Mass settings which were to be largely preserved in Anglican cathedrals. It was said that there was some casualness, some loss of reverence and dignity. Yet, in truth, this is a matter, not of language but of poor production. Anyone who has attended one of those 15-minute speed Masses in Latin would confirm this.

With this greater participation in the liturgy has come greater participation in the life of the local church. With lay people, male and female, assisting in the distribution of Communion, acting as servers and readers, the Mass has become more visibly the action of the people and this begins to spill over into the whole running of a parish. Perhaps this process has been driven too much by the growing shortage of priests rather than by a faith-driven understanding of our common life in Christ. There are at the moment worrying signs amongst some young and clearly insecure priests of a re-inflation of an old clericalism, which would set them back on a pedestal. But where the aspirations of the council really meet the buffer is when the people want to assist in the writing of the Church's agenda. There are a number of issues, which significantly seem to centre on sex and personal relationships – areas in which lay men and women might be thought to have some expertise - and which cry out for open and honest discussion. But the faithful are told to be silent and to obey.

After the Council itself there was launched in 1962 a great Pastoral Council in Liverpool - a meeting of priests and laity. Here that openness was achieved but to such an extent that its findings had to be massaged in a final report in order to make them

presentable in Rome. The participants of the Pastoral Council did not recognise their conclusions in this document. The unfortunate signal went out that there were areas out of bounds to the laity.

But the Bishops were to be similarly treated. Inspired by the Council came regular Synods of Bishops – great gatherings in Rome of bishops from throughout the world. These could have signalled exactly how Rome can go on being of service to the universal church, becoming a listening post, a place, which enables all this national and cultural diversity to come together. But instead these Synods have become totally controlled by the Vatican, not an occasion for bishops to speak their mind and make decisions but to be lectured at and to be guided into the sort of loyal affirmations of the sort which dictators are accustomed to manipulate.

The reasons for this new wave of centralisation are complex. Modern means of communication of course make central control much easier. In the good old days if you sent a query to Rome, a man would have to set off on a long journey over the Alps in all sorts of terrible weather conditions. Having reached Rome, he would then have to join the queue of those coming with similar problems. By the time he had got his answer and plodded back over the Alps on his mule, the problem had probably been long solved. But now with e-mail, and a click of a mouse, the system can deliver what the 19th century “Ideal” Ward⁴ of Balliol College dreamed of – a papal bull with *The Times* every morning! But there is a sting in the tail or perhaps a gleam of light at the end of the tunnel – the very means of communication, which can deliver control, can, as we have been seeing dramatically in North Africa and Middle East, also serve the cause of transparency, criticism and subversion. The fact is that it is now more difficult to suppress what the powers-that-be hold to be dangerous ideas.

But this does not mean that they give up trying. The Council wanted to see the back of the old Inquisition and wanted a re-born Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to take on the more positive task of promoting good creative theology. But this hope has not been fulfilled. We are still regaled with the news of some hard-working but maybe over-imaginative theologian being called to heel. It is happening right now to the Basque priest José Pagola, who has written a stunning book on the life of Jesus⁵, and of course it is also happening to nuns in the United States.



Basque priest José Pagola

The late 1960s was more generally a time of student unrest when university lecturers found dissent taking the place of the deference to which they had become accustomed. In the University of Tubingen a quiet scholarly Professor, one Joseph Ratzinger was scarred by this disorderly behaviour. He emerged from this experience convinced that there must, at all costs, be a return to order and discipline. And this rang bells with the new Pope, the Polish John Paul II. He was in every way a towering figure. He brought with him all the strength of

a church which had built strong defensive walls against two hostile regimes, those of the Nazis and the Communists. He knew the need for solidarity and unity in the face of the foe. In the west he believed that the Church encountered another foe, that of affluent hedonistic secularism. He, with his new leader of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, that same Joseph Ratzinger, would shore up these walls. Dissent became the foe – obedience the top virtue.

Quickly it was forgotten where unquestioning obedience (“obeying orders”) had got us under the tyrants. Soon it was overlooked that *true* loyalty, that of the friend, is always to be *critical* loyalty. The resulting assault on intellectual freedom in the Church led to a muting of that dialogue which the Council had sought with the world. Instead of sitting together to listen for the truth the Catholic voice became more strident and confrontational thus, as with all raised voices, betraying the fear and insecurity which lay in the background.

The same fear threatens the whole vision of inclusive Catholicism. Great strides forward were made in ecumenism. The welcome given at the Council to those observers from other churches made an enormous impression and built a new platform of trust. Here the churches of the Reformation really believed that they had been listened to. And this contagion of charity spread out into the local scene. I was to become vicar of a mining parish in County Durham where it was still common for the children from local state schools to be engaged in exchanges not only of abuse but also of fisticuffs with those from the Catholic school.

In this country these local advances were backed by serious theological discussion between the churches. The Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) strove to get behind the language of debate and confrontation to the real issues. Impressive work was done and evidence produced that there existed more convergence than divergence. It was a time of enormous ecumenical hope. When I was here in Oxford at the University Church the Christian community was able to welcome the great Cardinal Suenens as the University Missioner and a few years later Cardinal Hume and Archbishop Runcie as joint missioners. Trust was building - friendships were forged.

But that wise Anglican ecumenist Henry Chadwick pointed to the frailty of ecumenical endeavour. Often in the past separated churches had drawn tantalisingly close together, only to miss the moment and spring apart. And that it seems is what has happened again. Anglicans did not quite realise how seriously Catholics were taking these talks and how Catholics saw the clear goal as nothing less than the two churches becoming one. All many Anglicans wanted was to blow the theological whistle and announce that we were all one really. They did not understand that going ahead unilaterally with the ordination of women was to radically alter the context in which these talks had taken place.

But the cause was not helped by the somewhat icy reception which Rome gave to ARCIC's final report. It was made clear that the CDF was not happy with the methodology of ARCIC, and they wanted to be assured that the language of ARCIC was not just *consonant* with that of Catholic teaching, but also *equivalent* to it. It proved to be fatal nitpicking while the project unravelled. The patient task of listening to and learning from one another has been abandoned for the unilateral

Rome-imposed short cut of the Ordinariate - in itself yet another flight from proper consultation and collegiality.

All this is deeply tragic for at no time have the two churches needed more to learn from one another. We are both wounded churches – Anglicans from their divisions over homosexual priests and Catholics over the scandal of sexual abuse: it is the curious matter of sex which trips us both up. But right now Catholics need to learn from Anglicans about how priests and laity can make decisions together, and about the ministry of women in the Church, and Anglicans need to see how an international communion needs that ministry of Peter, the Petrine Rock, to hold it together. Right now that Rock of Peter is seen only as a missile being hurled at them, a centralised authoritarianism which has no attractions.

Dismantling vested interests and dispersing power require a tough and shrewd operator but above all one with the Council's clear vision of a generous inclusive Catholicism and of the great potential of a reformed Papal ministry in service of this vision. Does that require, as some think, another Council? Or will it fall to the next Pope, another caretaker, an elderly Italian "safe pair of hands" who once more will surprise the world? Whether a new Council or a Pope, what will be needed is an assault on the present culture of fear which is driving us to shore up those defences.

"We are shrinking into ourselves", declared Newman in the mid-19th century. "We are narrowing the lines of communication, trembling at freedom of thought and using the language of dismay and despair at the prospect before us, instead of with the high spirit of the warrior, going out to conquer." That rather accurately describes our present position. It is surely a sad day when Catholics are to be found trying to defend marriage by claiming the right to discriminate against gays. A re-reading of that great 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel would help us summon up the determination that is needed.

The Church can only live by opening gates and taking risks. For that is the very nature of the God who is love: to risk all.

Peter Cornwell

This talk was given at Blackfriars Hall, Oxford, after the Annual General Meeting of the Newman Association on June 16th. Fr Cornwell is a Catholic priest at St John the Evangelist in Bath.

Notes

1. Maisie Ward *France Pagan? The Mission of Abbé Godin Sheed & Ward 1949*
2. John W. O'Malley *What Happened at Vatican II?* Harvard 2008
3. Ladislav Orsy *Receiving the Council* Liturgical Press 2009
4. William George Ward *The Ideal of a Christian Church 1844*
5. Jose Pagola *Jesus: An Historical Approach* Convivium Press 2009