

## Vatican II –A New Pentecost

The following article by **Fr. Peter Phillips** of the Shrewsbury Diocese was written originally for the Diocesan Education Publication *The Echo* (Sept 2002). It was developed as a talk to the Manchester and North Cheshire Circle of the Newman Association in October 2009 *Vatican II: Challenging the Prophets of Doom and Gloom*.

There is no doubt that the Second Vatican Council is the defining event of modern Catholicism. The achievement of the Council Fathers is staggering. In four sessions, held each autumn from 1962 to 1965, the bishops of the world, supported by leading theologians and experts, travelled to Rome to set out a vision for the Church in modern times.

This vision is spelt out in four major documents: on the nature of the Church itself (*Lumen gentium*), on Revelation and the place of Scripture in the Church (*Dei Verbum*), on the liturgy (*Sacrosanctum concilium*), and on the relationship between the Church and the world in which it finds itself (*Gaudium et spes*). These major texts are accompanied by a series of shorter documents, no less significant, including decrees on various aspects of life in the Church such as the decree on ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio*) and the declarations on religious freedom (*Dignitatis humanae*) and relations with other faith communities (*Nostra aetate*). Though much has been implemented, many things the bishops discussed are still to be made more completely effective in the life of the Church at large as well as in the lives of our parish communities.

Pope John XXIII wished to refresh the Church by flinging open the windows. He called for *aggiornamento* (an updating) and few could resist his faith-filled optimism as he spoke out forcefully against the prophets of doom and gloom. For Pope John history was the great teacher of life. We must listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches. His opening address to the Council on October 11th 1962 was to set the agenda for the bishops and still deserves careful reading. What John began, Paul VI, more cautious by nature, was able to guide to a successful conclusion.

At the heart of the Council's vision lies a call for participation and for dialogue at all levels both within the Church and between the Church and the world which we serve. This is something we recognise in the liturgy. The Council Fathers insisted that 'by virtue of their baptism, it is the right and duty of the Christian people' (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, 14) to play their appropriate part: readers; those involved in music ministry; or in children's liturgy; eucharistic ministers; welcomers; all have an integral part to contribute to a parish's liturgical celebration.

What is celebrated in the liturgy is lived out in the community. The life of the parish is expressed in the work of various groups: children and young people are catechised, adults are led to a deeper understanding by journey in the faith programmes, which take their cue from the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. There are opportunities to pray and work with other Christians, faith communities and also with the wider society. Justice and Peace groups allow local communities to respond to the challenge of national and international concern. The work of organisations like CAFOD and Progressio, as well as the Newman Association itself, represent the glories of the post-Vatican II Catholic community in England and Wales.

Most of us experience Church first and foremost as members of family and parish. But we look to wider horizons. The Council's vision was not for an understanding of the Church as a vast transnational institution, evermore streamlined and efficient, but for a Church experienced in Cardinal Willibrand's memorable phrase as a 'communion of communions'. One of the central themes of the Council's understanding of what it means to be Church brought to the fore the key notion of the local church. The local church, formed by the diocesan community, served by its bishop, supported in turn by his priests and deacons, is in communion with neighbouring dioceses and with the local Church of Rome, the symbol of unity lived out between the churches. Cardinal Walter Kasper put it this way:

"Just as the local churches are not branches or provinces of the universal Church, so the universal Church is not the sum or product of the coming together of local Churches... It is shaped according to the primal image of the Trinity, one God in three Persons. Unity does not exclude diversity but rather embraces it." (The Tablet, June 23rd 2001, p. 930).

As the cardinal recognises, this interpretation of Vatican II's thinking about the Church had particular implications for ecumenism, but it also tells us something about how we should value cultural difference. 'It has to be made clear', said the cardinal, 'that such unity in communion does not suppress or swallow up the individual churches and their legitimate traditions, but guarantees them a space of legitimate freedom' (ibid.).

The community of the Church has yet to take to heart the experience of the Vatican Council; it has to receive it. In fact when we talk about the reception of the Council's vision by the Church, we must remember that we are not talking simply of how the Church takes up and interprets the documents that the Council produced, but, much more importantly, how the Church takes up the defining experience of the Council itself. The Council Fathers experienced the Council as an experience of the Spirit, a new Pentecost, and this could be our experience of the Church today.

While accepting that the important thing remains a creativity which is shaped by the lively debate at all levels in the Church, I am going to offer my own view of the direction in which we might legitimately interpret the documents of Vatican II and provide a vision for the Church at the beginning of this new millennium. I see a servant Church called to serve its sisters and brothers in the world; a pilgrim community, at times travel stained, and a little weary, but nevertheless full of hope, as she journeys on, sometimes falteringly, towards the fullness of truth. Here is a community which listens to the word of the Scriptures, both in the liturgy and in the more informal setting of study groups and prayer groups, as it models itself on the eucharistic sacrifice which it gathers to celebrate.

Even in its brokenness this community is a Spirit-filled community, prepared to stride out, with a strong enough faith to allow itself to take risks. The Church is, as *Lumen gentium* suggests, not to be identified with the kingdom of God, but in her service of the world the Church remains its foretaste and promise, the sacrament of the unity of the human race. We don't hide behind defensive barriers, asserting clearly defined boundaries against those who might seem to differ from us, but allow ourselves to look out in appreciation of the hues of an ever receding horizon in recognition that even far off, amongst people with seemingly very different values, we can hold much in common. We can enrich and be enriched. Of course, it is a romantic vision, stained often by human sinfulness, but a sinfulness enfolded in the healing love of the Church's Lord.

Words of support and encouragement may often win hearts and minds more successfully than swift condemnations. The Church would be failing its Lord, however, if it failed, at times, to speak sternly; if it failed to identify injustice; to castigate greed and selfishness; to cry out against anything which diminishes what it means to be fully human. The Church's proclamation cannot always be a comfortable word, but it is always a healing word, hard though that might be to receive and hard though that might be to utter.

The opening sections of the last of the Council's documents, the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*), outlines a charter for dialogue. This is a theme which underlies the whole document as the Council Fathers ponder on the relationship between a servant Church and the world about it, stressing the dignity of the human person and the primacy of conscience. The Church's task is determined by its proclamation of the reign of God; it is not a matter of saving men and women from a hostile environment, as a previous generation might have insisted, but of transforming communities and the world we serve. Dialogue is one of the important words of Vatican II. Real dialogue entails a respectful listening to the other and a preparedness to learn from another's experience.

The nature of Christian discipleship is to be in the world as one who listens. We can never approach another from the impregnable position of certainty. This is a feature of an ideological or fundamentalist stance. The fundamentalist lives in a closed world in which the basic questions have already been satisfactorily answered without remainder; here there can be no grounds for discriminating between different interpretations of the world. Discrimination must be learnt. For John Henry Newman religious truth has to be approached in a spirit of homage. Even though adherents of a religious faith may have the 'certitude' (to use Newman's word) that they live in the truth, this must inevitably remain open to a constant and complex process of testing and re-interpretation. It is subject to the business of living out one's life with other human beings. There is risk here. Such encounters with the experience of others cannot exclude a certain vulnerability which, after all, marks out all Christian discipleship; we can expect nothing less.

Some Catholics argue that the Council has been misinterpreted and that we need to get the barque of Peter back on an even keel. But there are contending interpretations of doctrine. There is no harm in this: working contradictions can lead to an exciting ferment and creative tension. This was the situation of the Council itself. It is important to recognise such tensions as we seek to come to terms with the various attempts to grasp the meaning of the Council and the subsequent challenge of what is sometimes termed a restorationist agenda. These people seek to restore the certainties which have been felt to have been lost, and to rebuild the boundaries which sustain our securities.

For many, boundaries do indeed give a sense of belonging, of necessary identity and self-definition, but they exclude as much as they include. The experience of those who live on the margins of contemporary society is predominantly that of exclusion; even the most well-intentioned attempts to establish boundaries are felt as a threat. It is significant that Jesus in the gospels sought time and time again to subvert such boundaries: to include where the community sought to exclude. He used the familiar gesture of shaking the dust from the feet of the returning Jewish pilgrim which dramatically differentiated pagan territories from God's holy land to highlight that only those who refuse to listen are now cut off: wherever the message is welcomed, there is to be found holy ground (Mat 9.14). The parable of the sower (Mk 4.1-9), too, helped along by the early Christian allegorising included in Mk 4.13-20, is often taken as an attempt to draw boundaries. It is understood as marking off those bounded plots of good soil from the unproductive wastes beyond. A more radical reading might suggest that even in the most unexpected and wildest places there might be found tiny pockets of fertile soil to be treasured and valued if they are but recognised.

Such simple gestures of care and love are rarely acknowledged; the immediacy of God's saving presence is rarely named. We need to fashion together new sets of symbols in order to express the ever-healing tenderness of God's presence, but these cannot be imposed; the task depends on attentive listening to a painstaking interpretation of the experience of those with whom we journey. The Christian community might provide the tools and the language which enables us to do just this: it affords the ability to recognise and to affirm the Spirit's work, but such a vision does not constrain the Spirit. The Spirit, as we know, blows where it wills (John 3.8). It is our task as disciples to acknowledge this, as the Council Fathers appreciated. This discovery might, in turn, challenge the self-understanding of that communion of communions which is the Church, and open communities to a new experience of God's healing presence.

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