

What Now for the Catholic Church in the West?

by Adrian Conway

Introduction

Some questions are worth asking even if a complete answer proves illusive. This is one such question. It is dreadfully immodest in scope and ambition and so requires some explanation. Limiting attention to *the West* is perhaps its sole humility, that is, those cultures directly derived from Western Europe and therefore with a Christian heritage. Thus, our reflections will be relevant to the Catholic Church within modern Western culture *wherever it exists globally*. This choice is largely driven by the belief that Enlightenment derived Western culture offers Christianity its most sophisticated challenge going forward. However, it should be clear that our reflections will nonetheless have relevance to the Church as a whole. Fifty years on from the opening of the Second Vatican Council, it is also a timely question as the Council's legacy passes to the next generation.

Continuity and Change

Vatican II is the twenty-first general council of the Catholic Church. Historically and theologically it stands in continuity with all those previous councils in that it clearly fulfilled the conditions for a valid council, and like every one of those previous councils sought to resolve particular issues for the Church of the day through definition and guidance. Furthermore, the Council itself represents the culmination of a gradual renewal movement that had arguably already begun in 1891 with Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.

So, before Vatican II the Catholic Church had seven sacraments, clergy, laity, Magisterium, Pope, religious communities, tabernacles, saints, rosaries, statues, candles, incense, vestments, catechesis, prayer meetings, universities, social clubs, charities, fund raisers, and it still has. From this perspective, it is valid to argue that Vatican II hardly changed a thing.

But, of course, there is another perspective and perhaps a more important one. It may sound strange to suggest there is something more important than these fundamentals of the faith. However, it is true. It is what makes sense of them. Namely, what the Holy Spirit is calling the Church to achieve specifically in any given age; how we are meant to be ordering and directing such fundamentals for our mission in the world. In this sense, it is crucial to recognise that Vatican II has been like an adrenaline shot through the Church's heart. The style of its documents indicates the difference, the paradigm shift. The documents are not, like those of all previous councils, a list of condemnations or specific pithy doctrinal formulae but are rather more like treatises – attempts to synthesize truths for the purposes of pastoral renewal. So, grasping the correct meaning of this renewal is crucial to answering our question.

Vatican II: Legacy

When Pope John XXIII referred to the Council as a driver of renewal – *aggiornamento* – he also envisaged it as *a new Pentecost for a new age*. Pentecost, of course, traditionally represents the birth of the Church, when the Apostles, filled with the

Holy Spirit, became living witnesses to Christ. So Pope John clearly had a new sense of mission in mind. What, though, specifically? He used a telling phrase that also appears in the council documents themselves and has been consciously emphasized by the popes since Vatican II...

At all times the Church, if it is to carry out its task, carries the responsibility of *reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel*. In language intelligible to every generation, she should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which humans ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other. We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live.ⁱ

Intent on gathering the signs of the times in the present of history, faith commits every one of us to become a living sign of the presence of the Risen Lord in the world. What the world is in particular need of today is the credible witness of people enlightened in mind and heart by the word of the Lord, and capable of opening the hearts and minds of many to the desire for God and for true life, life without end.ⁱⁱ

Reading and responding to the signs of the times is the crucial and distinctive legacy of Vatican II. It was a Church council concerned not with outright condemnation, contempt, rejection or ignorance of the world but rather it sought to encourage a *challenging engagement* with it. It was not preoccupied with internal Church matters but rather showed acute awareness of modernity and of the astonishing acceleration in human understanding in our age. All the incredible achievements of the Council spring from this bedrock.

Signs of the Times

Correctly interpreting the signs of the times is a daunting task. Where, after all, should the Church be focusing her efforts when critically engaging modernity? A distinction found in the crucial documents of Vatican II – that is, Church in the world and Church in herself – is helpful here.

Church in the World: Green, Mean and Lean

These three critical *signs of the times* are all addressed in *Gaudium et Spes*, but have emerged over the last fifty years as the battleground for the Church's missionary focus.

Green – An Eclipsing Crisis

Crisis is a popular, almost overused, word in our modern world and so too in our Church. Yet it has its place. And that place is our planet. We teeter on the brink of man-made environmental catastrophe. Despite all the nay-saying of vested interests, we are critically contributing to a warming of our global atmosphere through CO2 emissions.

Scientific fact! The burning of fossil fuels, the use of aerosols, intensive animal agriculture and deforestation are all prime factors. Knock-on effects are the melting of the ice-caps, a consequent rise in sea-levels and ocean acidification which in turn is leading to widespread flooding of land usually occupied by

the world's poorest people, food chain collapse and species extinctions. Add to this the routine use of pesticides which often run-off into water tables and the seas, non-biodegradable plastics clogging the marine environment, hazardous and particularly nuclear waste dumping, urban sprawl and associated habitat destruction, trawler fishing and fish-stock decimation... the list seems endless.

*The sign of the times, the ultimate signifier of human transgression in our world, is surely the erosion of our relationship to the environment: our commoditising of creatures and our disconnection to the soil, the earth, the very stuff of which we are made. Catholics, particularly Western ones, should be leading the way in terms of reflection, awareness, lifestyle, organisation and impetus. Our failure to act now is likely to be seen by future generations as nothing less than complicity in a crime; a moral blindness of incomprehensible proportions.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Mean – Opposing the Culture of Death

There is, however, another less visible yet equally salient sign which Pope John Paul II sought tirelessly to address, namely, the culture of death. He described it in terms of *a war of the powerful against the weak* in his 1995 *Encyclical Evangelium Vitae*:

...a life which would require greater acceptance, love and care is considered useless, or held to be an intolerable burden, and is therefore rejected in one way or another. A person who, because of illness, handicap or, more simply, just by existing, compromises the well-being or lifestyle of those who are more favoured tends to be looked upon as an enemy to be resisted or eliminated.^{iv}

Vulnerable humans, particularly in the womb, are still being deprived of protection after all these years; their seemingly relentless destruction passed off as progress. The statistics are as grim as any genocide: World Health Organisation figures estimate between forty and fifty million abortions globally every year, not counting the use of over-the-counter abortifacients. And what of the hundreds of thousands of frozen embryos in suspended animation often destined for experimentation and destruction? *Harvesting! Spares! Products of fertilisation! Biological material!* A bitter fruit of the Enlightenment: the sundering of science and morality at the cost of so many innocent lives.

Have we yet fully and capably responded to Pope John Paul's summons in *Evangelium Vitae*?

What is urgently called for is a general mobilization of consciences and a united ethical effort to activate a great campaign in support of life. All together, we must build a new culture of life.^v

He rightly compared his call to that of Pope Leo XIII's in *Rerum Novarum* which, amongst other things, sought to give voice to the often ignored wretchedness of many of the urban poor in nineteenth century industrialized nations.^{vi} Today, it is the unborn who have no voice and soon surely the elderly who will be silenced... and who after that? It is long past time to halt this eclipse of the value of human life in our world. This must be more than a hope. It is an imperative for the Church of today, especially in the West.

Lean – The Wealth of... Problems

God destined the earth and all it contains for all peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all humanity under the guidance of justice tempered by charity.^{vii}

This extract from *Gaudium et Spes* encapsulates the three key elements of our third sign. The first of these we have seen identified in *Rerum Novarum* as an evil of our industrial age, namely, wealth disparities. It is our duty to support all authentic ways of overcoming poverty in our world and this includes assessing how profit serves the common good. As Pope Benedict expresses it:

Profit is useful if it serves as a means towards an end that provides a sense both of how to produce it and how to make good use of it. Once profit becomes the exclusive goal, if it is produced by improper means and without the common good as its ultimate end, it risks destroying wealth and creating poverty.^{viii}

The recent global financial crisis (2007-2012) – born in the West – brought to light the reality that the market economy has either been routinely manipulated by the very rich to make themselves even richer or that it has been so poorly regulated and managed that the result has been the same. One of the key drivers has been the wanton availability of credit. And this is surely the second significant element of this sign. The levels of debt - personal, corporate, governmental – that we have all been weaned on have often fuelled our consumption, and that gratification seemingly blinds us to the risks inherent in the indebtedness. And the third element is directly related: overconsumption which appears inevitably associated with capitalist market economics exported globally from the West. Indeed, what right-thinking person can fathom recent statistics from the World Health Organisation and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation: that very soon on our planet, with current rates of consumption, the numbers of undernourished and starving people will be exceeded by the numbers of overfed and obese people?^{ix}

Pope Benedict in *Caritas in Veritate* called for *further and deeper reflection on the meaning of the economy and its goals* as part of the search for *new solutions* to correct the *dysfunctions and deviations* of economic short-termism and narrow Capitalism. It is surely the right time for the Church in the West to take up this reflective opportunity.

Church in Herself: Fit for Purpose

Out of many possible signs of the times relating to the Church's self-organisation, these following three are most pertinent to the Catholic Church in the West and are centred on her effectiveness in critically engaging with modernity.

Preaching to the Deserted

There is a reason why Joseph Ratzinger chose the papal name Benedict and why his pontificate has been so focused on what has been called the New Evangelization – secularisation. Pope Benedict has even established a specific pontifical council to address the matter, the primary purpose of which is to promote a renewed evangelisation in countries where the Church has long existed, "...but which are living a progressive secularisation of society and a sort of *eclipse of the sense of God*."^x This means the countries of the West, and particularly Europe. We are

missionary territory. Has this been fully grasped yet? Is our mission clear before us? Are we organised and equipped for the task with the right people, resources and support? The Year of Faith is upon us: addressing these questions might be timely.

Education, Education, Education

Possible reasons for secularisation are well-documented: breakdown in community living and a sense of belonging; individualism or atomisation; the erosion of confidence in authority and its purpose; the rise of reductive rationalism and Scientism (the unscientific use of science to invalidate faith); the lampooning of faith in the public domain; also regrettably, the bad example of believers, and so on. These are all relevant, but, in our response to secularisation, we are undoubtedly failing ourselves badly by a woeful lack of formal adult educational provision, particularly at parish level in this country.

The 1997 *General Directory for Catechesis* states:

In truth, the inner growth of the Church and her correspondence with God's plan depend essentially on catechesis. In this sense catechesis must always be considered a priority in evangelization. ^{xi}

My experience as an adult catechist has confirmed a long-held intuition: that a well-instructed, -formed, -educated and articulate Catholic is not only undaunted by anything secularism advances but (perhaps obviously) also offers a much more authentic alternative. There is an enormous gap in provision for clear, concise, coherent and credible catechesis as well as for subtle apologetics, and that gap needs closing as a matter of priority.

Clerical Errors

There are two crucial parts to this sign.

The first notable ailment in the Western Church's internal dynamics is *compulsory* clerical celibacy. Celibacy is a gift, a vocation. As such, clerical celibacy should be promoted and cherished in our tradition. However, as a rule it is simply arbitrary and fails to reflect and indeed stifles the rich diversity of the Church's own vocational life. It also undermines the integrity of the Sacraments of Holy Matrimony and Holy Orders.

The fact is that we have married priests in the Western Catholic Church. If being married is sacramentally and practically compatible with being a priest, why is it only accepted in the case of Christians coming into full communion? Under present celibacy rules, we have the nonsensical situation where married Catholic priests are unable to exercise their ministry because they discovered their vocation to married life after discovering their priestly vocation, whilst married Catholic priests are able to exercise their ministry because they discovered their vocation to married life before discovering their priestly vocation. Furthermore, why are married deacons or priests not permitted to re-marry in the event of the death of their spouse? If the word crisis has any meaning when applied to clerical vocations in the Western Church this surely plays its part in it.

The second problem hampering the Church's organisational vitality and self-expression is the exclusion of the laity from Church governance. Arguably, the overall vision

of the clergy-laity relationship in the documents of Vatican II and subsequent magisterial statements is one of collaboration. However, there are mixed messages: Like all Christians, the laity should promptly accept in Christian obedience what is decided by the pastors who, as teachers and rulers of the Church, represent Christ.^{xii} Priests should unite their efforts with those of the lay faithful and conduct themselves among them after the example of the Master...they should be willing to listen to lay people, give brotherly consideration to their wishes, and recognise their experience and competence in the different fields of human activity. In this way they will be able to recognise along with them the signs of the times.^{xiii}

Canon 536 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law leaves it to the judgement of the local bishop whether there should be pastoral councils at all in his diocese and even then they are only consultative not governing.^{xiv}

Until we grasp the full implications of the collaborative-missionary vision of Vatican II, clerical voices will not be appropriately challenged and enriched by lay ones; men's voices will not be appropriately challenged and enriched by female ones; clerics will continue to occupy positions more appropriate to lay people and often for which they are untrained and unskilled; and priests will continue to believe they are ordained by God to run parishes. As long as lay people continue to be excluded from Church governance, we will not achieve the full meaning of that renewal initiated by Pope John under the breath of the Holy Spirit^v.

Conclusion

Pope Benedict, during his recent visit to this country, gave us a living example of this critical engagement with modernity: his natural, understated confidence, his pilgrim gentleness, and the challenging subtlety and sensitivity of his words. All such examples are built upon Vatican II's legacy of perceiving the signs of the times and responding to them in the light of the Gospel. If this analysis is correct, then perhaps the Church in West at the dawn of the Third Millennium needs to shake off a fifty-year stupor to hear afresh the words of her Master and to grasp their urgency: Do you not say, "There are yet four months, then comes the harvest"? I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest (Jn 4:35).

*This article is based on a talk delivered to the Hertfordshire Circle on 14th October 2012.
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Notes

- i Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), Austin Flannery (Gen Ed), Scholarly Resources Inc, Delaware, 1975, n 4 (with syntax change)
- ii Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei* (Door of Faith), 2011, n 15 – Announcing a Year of Faith to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council and the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church
- iii cf CAFOD 2008, *The Call of Creation*, release of previous document of Bishops' Conference in England and Wales; ARC (Alliance of Religions & Conservation) a secular organisation linking faith and conservation groups
- iv Pope John Paul II, Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, 1995, n 12
- v *Id*, n 95
- vi Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, 1891, n 3
- vii Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), Austin Flannery (Gen Ed), Scholarly Resources Inc, Delaware, 1975, n 69

- viii Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, 29th June 2009, n21
- ix WHO - 2012 Report based on 194 member states, ½ billion or 12% of global population obese; compare UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) 2010 report: 925m = 13.6% of estimated 6.8bn worldwide
- x *Id*
- xi Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 1997, n 64
- xii Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), Austin Flannery (Gen Ed), Scholarly Resources Inc, Delaware, 1975, n 37
- xiii Vatican Council II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*), Austin Flannery (Gen Ed), Scholarly Resources Inc, Delaware, 1975, n 9
- xiv cf Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*, 25 '...the recent Synod [Extraordinary of 1985] has favoured the creation of diocesan pastoral councils, as a recourse at opportune times. In fact, on a diocesan level this structure could be the principal form of collaboration, dialogue and discernment as well. The participation of the lay faithful in these councils can broaden resources in consultation and the principle of collaboration - and in certain instances also in decision-making - if applied in a broad and determined manner.' - *opportune times, could, can, certain instances*
- xv cf Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*, 23. Principle of Lay Office - Pastors should entrust to laypeople those offices and roles 'that do not require the character of orders'. These include exercising the ministry of the Word, presiding over liturgical prayers, conferring baptism and distributing communion. No sense of collaborative governance

Fifty Official Years of the Hertfordshire Circle

The Hertfordshire Circle officially celebrated its 50th anniversary a few months ago – though anecdotal evidence suggests the Circle might really be even older! On September 28th Bishop John Sherrington (Bishop in Hertfordshire) and Father Tim Edgar celebrated a special Mass at St. Bartholomew’s Church in St. Albans. Despite several absences through pre-arranged holidays around 50 people attended the event, including some members of long-standing. At a reception in the church hall afterwards Bishop John talked informally to many of the guests and he presented illuminated certificates to founder and long-standing members of the Herts. Circle. He then cut the birthday cake, which had been beautifully decorated with various symbols associated with John Henry Newman. The afternoon ended with a glass of champagne and a toast to the Circle.

Bishop Sherrington’s Address

I am delighted to celebrate this Mass with you as you celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Newman Association’s Hertfordshire Circle. As we celebrate your Golden Jubilee, we recognise the different ways in which you have been seeking for the truth, whether as individuals or together as a group. Through seeking the truth, you have desired to know and understand your Christian faith more fully in order to find meaning in your lives and to give “reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). As Blessed Pope John Paul II writes in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*:

Revelation therefore introduces into our history a universal and ultimate truth which stirs the human mind to ceaseless effort; indeed, it impels reason continually to extend the range of its knowledge until it senses that it has done all in its power, leaving no stone unturned.

In the gospel which we have just heard (Luke 9: 18-22), Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do the crowds say I am?” and more personally, “Who do you say I am?” This