

The Second Vatican Council

1962 - 1965

John XXIII and *aggiornamento*

The Patriarch of Venice was elected to the Papacy on the death of Pius XII who had governed the Church throughout the Second World War. He presented as a dear old man with a big tummy, but he had had a distinguished career as a diplomat, being Nuncio to Paris at the time of his appointment to Venice. Far from being the expected stop-gap, he decided (one morning) to summon the twentieth Ecumenical Council to confront the problems of the Church in the middle of the twentieth century. He spoke of "opening the windows of the Church to let in fresh air"; of "opening the doors to the world"; of "polishing up the face of the Church to reflect the face of Christ to the world"; and above all he spoke of the receptivity the Church should have to the Holy Spirit.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*)

Imported the notion of the Church as *the pilgrim People of God*, in contrast with the earlier model which equated it with the Kingdom of God. This had done violence to the Kingdom, better understood anyway as the *reign* of God, to the Church itself, and also to the world the Church was established to serve. It damaged the Kingdom, because it restricted the understanding of the divine approach to the whole of humanity to one culturally-determined reality - the Roman Catholic Church; it damaged the Church itself, because it got snagged for centuries on the preservation of its divine right to govern and interfere in the power-structure of other kingdoms - the preservation of the papal titles like *father of princes*, and the constant seeking to appoint earthly monarchs (Charlemagne *et cie*) or depose them (cf King John, Elizabeth I); and it damaged the world by confusing and impeding the Gospel, mingling it with cultural and political questions not truly germane to the issues of salvation.

Untold consequences flowed from this enormously influential cultural shift. One was concerned with authority. The new way of talking about the Church sounded much more democratic than ever before. The old model of the church had been pyramidal, with (notionally Christ - perhaps more realistically the Pope) at the peak, and then the hierarchy, descending through bishops to priests to deacons (although these had practically speaking died out by now) and ending up with an extensive, subordinated, and largely uncommunicative base made up of the lay men and women. The new model was much more scriptural: the themes of the *body* came to the fore, with the connotations of organic unity, leading on to the notions of *co-responsibility* and *subsidiarity* (a term which has since passed into political usage, particularly in the EC). Co-responsibility for the Church is laid equally on all the members; there is diversity of ministry, and all work together to support it. Leadership can be exercised at any level, and is to be recognized for what it is.

There is a quite new emphasis on the *prophetic* role as opposed to the *institutional*. To illustrate: a man may be appointed as Bishop, but not enjoy great gifts of natural authority or leadership. The institution appoints him, but cannot confer what he does not have. On the other hand, a prophetic personality may appear who does not have any official sanction, and he may actually change the history of the Church. So the conflict between Lech Walesa and the Polish government displays the same sort of clash that was taking place in the Church. In the past it was regarded as inequitable, as in the case of someone like Francis of Assisi, a tremendous

charismatic leader who changed the history of the world; he was eventually either ordained a deacon (unlikely) or given out as having been ordained a deacon, so as to include him under the umbrella of the institution.

This development of recognition of charisms was further developed by the issuing of the **decree on the apostolate of the laity**. Furthermore, the recognition of truly ecumenical insights was enshrined in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, and elaborated in the **Decree on Ecumenism**, and the **Decrees on the Catholic Eastern Churches**, and the **Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions**. Only a divine intervention can explain this transformation of the Roman Church's attitude towards other Christian communities. The **Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World** (*Gaudium et Spes*) is scarcely of less significance than its parent document, re-evaluating the whole relationship of the Church to modern civilisation.

The new understanding of the co-responsibility of Bishops was to bear fruit in the **Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops** (*Christus Dominus*); this allowed the setting-up of pastoral structures within countries, the modern Episcopal Conferences, with agencies governing the whole endeavour of the Church in that country. The note of democracy is hard to ignore, and reaches down through Diocesan structures to the humble parish pastoral council. The recognition of lay people's right to found and foster their own associations was written into the Church's legislation, and for the first time there were movements officially sanctioned in the Church which were not under the government of clerics.

This new respect for the individual - related to the spirit of the times - produced one time-bomb, the **Declaration on Religious Liberty** (*Dignitatis Humanae*) of 7 xii 65, which was a solemn recognition of the sovereignty of the individual conscience in religious matters.

The decrees most influential on our lives may have been the **Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy** (the first document to be issued) and the **Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation** (*Dei Verbum*) which changed the whole experience of Church on Sunday Morning.