
Vatican II: 25th Anniversary

Eryl Davies

1990 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Vatican Council II which officially ended in December 1965. It has been described as the most important event in the history of the Roman Catholic Church since the Protestant Reformation. Certainly its influence on Christendom generally, and Roman Catholicism in particular, has been extensive and far reaching. Pope John Paul II describes it as:

‘...that great event which took place in the life of the Church; the Second Vatican Council’, (Encyclical Epistle, June, 1985).

Gustavo Gutierrez claims that:

‘The Second Vatican Council is undoubtedly the most important event in the history of the Catholic Church for several centuries’ (The Reception of Vatican II, p 171)

while, earlier, Pope John XXIII insisted that the Council was:

‘a leap forward toward an understanding of doctrine and a formation of consciences...’ (idem).

Another Roman Catholic theologian writes that ‘The Council represents a point of no return’ (idem p 24). At this point, it may be helpful to ask a number of questions concerning Vatican II.

When was Vatican II held?

It was opened by Pope John XXIII on the 11th of October, 1962. There were four main sessions; one session of several weeks duration was held each year from 1962—1965. A considerable amount of preparatory work was also done by ten Preparatory Commissions and two Secretariats and there were many specialist advisers and theologians.

Who called the Council?

Two earlier Popes had thought of the idea of convening a Council. In 1923, Pius XI asked to see the files on Vatican I with the idea of following it up with another Council but he later dropped the idea. Later, in February 1948, the Pope’s advisers set out five reasons why Pope Pius XII should convene a Council. Partly because of the difficulty in getting all the bishops together and lodging them in Rome, the Pope hesitated and instead set up five secret commissions to make preparatory studies.

The strict, conservative Pope Pius XII was followed by Pope John XXIII who became Pope in 1958 at the age of 77. Some of the Cardinals regarded John as a ‘stop-gap’ or ‘transitional’ Pope. Although in office for only 4½ years (he died on 3rd June, 1963), Pope John decided to call the Council in January, 1959. Vatican officials opposed John’s decision unsuccessfully and many felt that he was now a dangerous innovator.

What is a Council in Roman Catholicism?

It is a meeting of all the Roman Catholic Bishops. Archbishops and Cardinals throughout the world. There have been many ecumenical Councils in the history of Christendom. For example, eight were held in the Early Church period and the Early Middle Ages including Nicea (325 AD) and Chalcedon (451 AD). Another ten Councils were held between 1123—1512 but these were largely Roman Catholic because of divisions with the Eastern Churches. In the modern period, three Councils were held: Trent (1545—1563), Vatican I (1869—1870) and Vatican II (1962—1963) but these again were exclusively Roman Catholic Councils.

Why call a Council?

Historically, Councils were convened for two major reasons:

1. First of all, to enable the worldwide Church to discuss and define doctrine. For example, Nicea confirmed the deity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit while Chalcedon affirmed and formulated the divine and human natures of Christ in the unity of his divine Person. Trent rejected the doctrines of the Protestant reformers and, sadly, agreed that the Bible and Tradition were equally authoritative sources of truth, with the Church as its sole interpreter. Trent also confirmed the mediaeval view of the seven sacraments and re-affirmed the doctrine of the Mass. Vatican I confirmed papal infallibility and the Immaculate Conception (promulgated by the Pope in 1854).
2. Secondly, Councils were convened to resolve schism. The Council of Constance (1414—1418) met in the context of a schism which had occurred in 1378 and at one time there had been three rival Popes! The Council of Trent (1545—1563) dealt with the divisions created by the Reformation.

However, Pope John XXIII felt strongly that his Council should be 'pastoral', not primarily concerned with doctrines or schism but with the new needs of the Church and the world, together with the importance of interacting with secular, religious and contemporary thought. This radically different reason for calling Vatican II was not popular among the conservatives.

How was the Council structured?

2,540 bishops attended Vatican II whereas only 737 attended Vatican I. Vatican II was also the first Council at which non-Roman Catholic observers were present; in addition, Roman Catholic theological 'experts' were present and/or consulted. The latter were important because:

1. Pope John XXIII established ten Preparatory Commissions so these 'experts' contributed, advised and influenced these Commissions. As many as 190 theologians were nominated by the Pope as official Council 'experts'.
2. There were four main sessions of Vatican II, one session per year lasting for several weeks from 1962—1965. However, there was a lot of fringe activity by these 'experts', influencing the bishops by means of personal contact, lectures, writings, etc. These experts like Hans Küng, Karl Rahner, Gregory Baum and Edward Schillebeeckx flocked to Rome to listen to the Council debates and give their own views. It is said that during the Council, Rome was one big theological 'think-in' or, at least, a 'listen-in'.

3. Most of the Bishops/Cardinals in the Council were in touch with these 'experts'. There is a sense in which the Bishops went to school again in order to understand the new theological ideas and theological jargon; it was an intensive teach-in with great ferment of thought.

One man who was especially influential in Vatican II was **Karl Rahner**. Pope John XXIII included Rahner in the preparatory work but the 'big boys' in Rome prevented Rahner from joining any of the important preparatory commissions. He was, however, allowed to be a consultant and the Archbishop of Venice chose him as his personal theologian at the Council. Rahner was often shocked and disappointed at the draft copies of the Commissions/Council which the Archbishop gave him to read for they were too conservative. In February 1963, Rahner was named as one of seven theological experts for the text on THE CHURCH and he worked hard to exclude traditional, reactionary influences.

What did the Council discuss and decide?

The Council covered more subjects than any other previous Council; these subjects can be mostly subsumed under doctrinal, pastoral or relational and are to be found in the 16 main documents which emerged from the Council.

Concerning LITURGY, the vernacular was authorised as well as greater participation by the laity. The EASTERN CHURCHES were now recognised as enjoying equal rights and authority with the Latin churches. Rahner's influence was considerable on the subject of the DIACONATE; such people are not priests but dedicated 'in the service of the liturgy, of the Gospel, and of works of charity'. By 1984, the Roman Catholic Church had 10,500 deacons. Other subjects included the RELIGIOUS LIFE OF NUNS/MONKS; TRAINING OF PRIESTS; RELIGIOUS LIBERTY; MINISTRY AND LIFE OF PRIESTS; PIETY (fasting regulations relaxed, etc). Three other subjects dealt with are foundational and need to be mentioned in a little more detail. The subject of **Divine Revelation** was published under the title DEI VERBUM (18th November 1965) and it is the most important statement on this subject ever issued by the Roman Church. There was opposition to this statement even before the Council. For example, Cardinal Lienart denied that there were two sources of revelation. He insisted that the Bible, the Word of God, was the unique source of revelation and he urged the bishops to think like those Protestants 'who have such a love and veneration for the Word of God...' Because of the support for this position in Council, the Pope intervened and established a special commission to revise it with the help of some radical theologians!

What can one say about the DEI VERBUM? Although Catholics are encouraged to read the Bible, the document is strongly existentialist in character and allows for a critical approach to the Bible. Just as serious is the inseparable relationship which is assumed between Scripture and Tradition. While *both* are from God and can be identified as 'the Word of God', Tradition is a more comprehensive term and is always placed *before* the Bible in this statement. Furthermore, it is still the magisterium of the Roman Church which *alone* has the grace and right to interpret the Word of God authentically so that the Church still stands supreme over the

Word! Vatican II and more recent developments have taken the Roman Church further away from inerrancy and the supreme authority of the Bible.

ECUMENISM was another major subject dealt with in Vatican II. The opening statement in this document states:

‘The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council’.

It is well-known that the Council adopted a new attitude towards Protestants, regarding them as ‘separated brethren’ rather than as heretics. The Council commended all kinds of ecumenical endeavours and insisted that:

‘sacred theology...must be taught with due regard for the ecumenical point of view...’

Priests, for example, should be trained in an ecumenical, not polemical, theology. **Certainly Vatican II gave considerable encouragement and impetus to the Protestant drive for visible Church unity.**

CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS was another key subject discussed by the Council. In a major document published on the 28th of October 1965, the Council indicated clearly its own position here:

‘The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflects a ray of that truth which enlightens all men... The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims...’ (pp 738-9):

The most important statement, however, on this subject is found in LUMEN GENTIUM, the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church:

‘Those who...do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart...may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God...’ (pp 367-8).

The influence of Karl Rahner and others here is dominant and achieved a major change on the part of the Council in its interpretation of the traditional dogma, ‘no salvation outside the Church’. Post-Vatican II theologians have developed in various ways the thesis that other religions are pre-Christian rather than non-Christian. **Pluralism is now a dominant influence within Christendom and society and poses a major challenge to biblical faith.**

How was the Council received?

Perhaps it is still too early to assess the work and influence of the Council in an exhaustive and definitive way. Is it appropriate, however, to attempt an assessment of the reception of this Vatican Council within the Roman Church? My answer is a positive one, especially after reading and enjoying **THE RECEPTION OF VATICAN II**, published by Burns & Oates, 1988 and edited by Giuseppe Alberigo (£20, pb, pp 363).

The book impresses me in several ways. First it is a competent and thorough account of the ways in which Vatican II and its sixteen documents have been

received by the Roman Church since 1965. The seventeen contributors are acknowledged specialists in areas of Roman Catholic theology and they write authoritatively on their respective subjects. Second, the range of subjects covered in the book also impresses me. Subjects range from the background and context of Vatican II to its more central themes as well as themes as yet insufficiently received by the Roman Church. One intriguing subject is entitled, REJECTIONS OF THE COUNCIL: 1966—1984. Another additional yet useful subject which is well-handled is THE RECEPTION OF VATICAN II AT THE EXTRA-ORDINARY SYNOD OF 1985; this is written by Avery Dulles. Third, I value the extensive bibliography and footnotes which each contributor provides; it is going to take me some time to read up some of the more important references!

Without going into much detail, I want to draw attention briefly to some of the chapters. Guisepppe Alberigo's opening chapter assesses the history of the Postconciliar Period. He insists that the phenomenon of Vatican II includes not only Vatican I (1869—1870) but to some extent even the Council of Trent (1544—1563). However, Alberigo maintains we are now coming to the end of only a first phase in post-Vatican II history. Already, Vatican II has assumed immense historical importance. 'The Council', he adds, 'represents a point of no return' or, better, in the words of John XXIII, 'a leap forward toward an understanding of doctrine and a formation of consciences, both of which are completely faithful to...authentic doctrine' (p 24). He then warns that 'an inability on the part of the Church to recognize this key moment in its one life would be a symptom of tragic sterility and blindness'.

Herman Pottmeyer's chapter is entitled, *A New Phase in the Reception of Vatican II: Twenty Years of Interpretation of the Council* (pp 27-43). He feels that Vatican II can best be described as a Transitional Council and, as such, presents a challenge to its interpreters. In his view, there are two major phases in the process of reception/interpretation. The first phase is one of excitement in which Vatican II was seen as a new beginning. The second phase was one of disillusionment or realism as the weight of tradition and the inertia of the Church slowed down the whole process. A new phase is now due but what will it be?

Two chapters which fascinated me, partly because of my interest in Liberation Theology, were *The Changing Social Contexts of Post Conciliar Catholicism and Latin America in the Medellin and Puebla Conferences*. The latter by Segundo Galilea made compelling reading and threw further light on the situation of the Churches in Latin America during the Council. For example, Latin America was not prepared for Vatican II yet several factors contributed subsequently to the good reception given to the Council, including the establishment in 1955 of CELAM (Latin American Episcopal Council) and increased awareness of injustice. The Medellin Conference of 1968 was a meeting point for the social transformation of Latin America and the ecclesial transformation wrought by the Council. It was at Medellin, of course, that the word and theme '*liberation*' appears for the first time in an official document of the Church. The Puebla Conference in 1979 was really a continuation of Medellin and 'became a vehicle for the reception of the Council, especially in certain areas of countries where neither Vatican II nor Medellin had

sufficiently penetrated' (p 69). Incidentally, Gustavo Gutierrez contributes an important essay on the 'reception' of Vatican II in Latin America in relation to the theme of 'the poor' (pp 171-193).

For those interested in contemporary theology and ecumenism, this book may serve as a useful text-book and springboard for further study. Vatican II initiated important changes representing a 'New Catholicism' and a 'Church Changed'. Despite its acceptance of the Reformers' principles of the vernacular in worship and the importance of the Bible, however, **Vatican II has sadly not heralded a return to biblical theology**. As Donald Carson comments:

'...the points that divide us are minor. We do not agree with Roman Catholics about the locus of revelation, the definition of the Church, the means of grace, the source of contemporary ecclesiastical authority...etc. The theological chasm between us remains wide...' (p 379, *EVANGELICAL AFFIRMATIONS*, Zondervan, 1990).

NOTES

1. Hans Küng underlines some changes for Christendom since Vatican II:
 - a) the Roman Catholic share of the guilt for the schism of the sixteenth century
 - b) other Christian communities are recognised as churches
 - c) an ecumenical attitude is required from the whole church
 - d) co-operation with other Christians is to be promoted in every way.
2. Page references apply to the official Council documents: Vatican Council II, volume I, ed Austin Flannery, Costello Publishing, 1984.

Dr Eryl Davies MA BD is Senior Tutor of the Evangelical Theological College of Wales.

Articles Planned For The Next Series

Among the topics we are preparing to consider during the next Subscription Series are:-

Preaching and Application

The Salvation of the Unevangelized?

Liberation Theology: its origin and early development

Commentaries: A recommended list

Focus on the Salman Rushdie Affair

Reconstructionism: basic hermeneutical questions

Social Issues: trends and assessment

To make sure that you benefit from these helpful articles, please return the Renewal Form now and take advantage of our Special Offer for the next six issues. If you believe that FOUNDATIONS is worth subscribing to, please recommend it also to others.
