

After the Council

by Henry St John O.P.

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The fourth and final Session of the Vatican Council has come to an end. The mind of the Council, and therefore of the Church as a whole, is now expressed in the sixteen official documents personally promulgated by the Pope in its name, four in the third Session and the remainder in the fourth. Most of these documents include, in a greater or lesser degree, outstanding new or revived insights into the nature of the Church and its place in the world. Many of them reflect the differing outlooks, in their various phases, of the bishops of the world and of the People of God they represent. Yet, on the whole, we may be deeply grateful for what the Council has given to the Church and to Christianity, as we stand at the beginning of what must be the momentous post-conciliar era. For in a very real sense the documents are seminal, seed planted in the soil of the life of the People of God. A long period of careful cultivation, within the *sensus fidelium*, now awaits them, before the fruits they may produce can be fully estimated and judged.

What will be the outcome? Will there be a real renewal, the emergence of a far more distinctive Christian character and attitude, manifesting more clearly the radical nature of the Church's impact on contemporary life, in our own nation and in the world beyond it? Or will the work of the Council remain largely on paper, in its Decrees and Constitutions? That depends on the Holy Spirit, who will not fail, and on a resultant response to spiritual leadership among clergy and laity, which could. At present, at diocesan and parochial level, among priests and people, little of what the Council's measures might involve is thought out, or the necessary steps to implement them realised.

The decrees of the third Session on Liturgy, on Ecumenism and on the Eastern Catholic Churches belong to the domestic life of the Church, and of Christendom in relation to the Church, as do the five decrees promulgated on October 28th in this last Session. Six more followed them before the final closure, among these the controversial Schema 13, on the Church in the Modern World, The Declaration on Religious Liberty, and the Constitution on Divine Revelation. These three are of very great importance, because they underlie, and are the necessary basis and outcome, of the new attitude of the Church to the World, summed up in the word *aggiornamento*, an attitude no longer of hostility and condemnation,

but of friendship and the desire to collaborate. They are designed to lay a new emphasis on the truth that all men everywhere are under the Lordship of Christ and potentially members of his kingdom. *Aggiornamento* within the life of the visible Church however is of primary concern, because upon what the Church, and with it all Christendom, can become, will depend Christianity's future impact on the world it serves.

In its final form Schema 13, as was inevitable, reflects at certain key points, the divided mind, the hesitations and weaknesses of the Catholic Church itself, and the Christian world at large, concerning the central and immediate problems of nuclear warfare, disarmament and world hunger. These problems are closely related, and because of their effect upon each other they call for united Christian action to change the very nature of Western civilization, from a predominantly self-seeking world-attitude to one which is re-orientated to an equally predominant self-giving within the family of the human race. Christians must be convinced that anything less than this will be an ineffectual palliative, an escape into the world of unreality created by the compromise of attempting to serve both God and mammon. The heart and life of such a new attitude must be Christian faith seeking unity, and wholly committed to the gospel of Christ, both in the here and now *and* eschatologically. A Christianity clearly seen to be of this mind will find a response to such an ideal also among many men and women of good will beyond its own boundaries of belief.

It is this situation which makes the Declaration on Religious Liberty so vital in relation to all the pronouncements promulgated by the Council. Without it the search for unity among Christians would be barren and unworkable, while in its light a sound basis for inter-Christian dialogue can be discerned and the possibility of building a conducting-bridge to encounter and collaboration between Christians and non-Christians. The Declaration has survived much debate and opposition inside as well as outside the Council, and has come through substantially intact as an elucidation of Pope John's short statement on the essence of conscience and its right to inviolability in *Pacem in Terris*. 'Every human being has the right to honour God according to the dictates of an upright conscience, and therefore the right to worship God publicly and privately.'¹

For the dialogue between separated Christians the Declaration is a charter of their equal status in ecumenical encounter, based upon conscientious conviction and good faith. Men and women who are Christians, by true conviction, whatever their particular allegiance may be, cannot rightly renounce their loyalty to that conviction. They are bound, at the same time, to concede a like indefensible

¹C.T.S. Translation *Peace on Earth* S.264, page 10.

privilege to those whose allegiance may be very different. Moreover this privilege extends from the individual to the group. The existence of the separated Churches of Christendom, as such, is a necessity, so long as their members are conscientiously convinced of the truth, as it is in Christ, of their particular tenets, in so far as these set them in opposition to each other.

In a real sense it is God's will that they should so exist until by his grace their disrupted unity can be restored by the unity movement now in progress. Whatever changes this may involve, and, in the end, they may be great and far reaching on all sides, it cannot mean the surrender of any belief accounted as part of God's revelation to men in Christ, or the acceptance as mandatory of any belief not so accounted. On this point all true ecumenists, of whatever allegiance, must be agreed. Catholics hold that the perfection of unity is the unity of love in the Blessed Trinity, that begins here below in grace and ends in glory. This is finally attained in the vision of God in heaven, and, in its fullness, for the human race, at the consummation of all things in Christ's second coming. There is however a necessary visible and organic unity of the Church on earth, by which all its full members are in communion with each other, under their bishops' leadership, each of whom is in communion with his fellow bishops and all of them together with the apostolic see of Rome. This unity is given and maintained by God in spite of the sins of its members. Its purpose, in God's design, is the preservation of the wholeness of truth and of the means of grace, as they are in Christ; the means by which he brings men to his Father. What is thus given to the world in Christ is however, by no means always accepted in its fullness by men, even within the visible unity given, yet it is always preserved and accessible.

Meanwhile all the other Christian Churches, in their separation, are under the guidance of God's providence, and the Holy Spirit works in them as corporate bodies, each according to its own particular condition. For each contains, in a greater or lesser degree, elements of the wholeness of the given truth and means of grace, that belong by right and by God's mercy to the Church which is one, in this unique sense. These elements include, at least, the external means, which the sacrament of baptism is, and its gift in Christ of the life of grace, faith, hope and charity and other inward gifts of the Holy Spirit. With this goes too the visible element of God's Word written, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the record of the Word spoken to his people calling for the response of genuine faith in Christ, as God and Saviour.

Such faith constitutes a true, though not complete, response to the authority of God's self-revelation. The incompleteness lies not in any lack of intensity in commitment, but in the extent to which God's truth can be mediated. This belongs, in its fullness, to the communion of the People of God in the totality of its visible structure. The

People of God thus finds its proper and safeguarded expression in the episcopate in communion with the apostolic see of Rome. The Pope as bishop is the keystone of the arch of the teaching authority by which, in this capacity, all the bishops by their apostolic office share, with the whole body of the faithful by the Holy Spirit's power in the servant ministry of Christ to the world. This proper expression secures the truth, as the People of God possess it, from positive error and helps to elucidate it for the understanding of faith. It does not, however, guarantee that at all times and in all places such truth will be adequately presented or on all sides fully apprehended. Nor does it exclude the churches outside its communion from sharing in the servant ministry of Christ to the world, though unable, without the sacrament of order, to possess that ministry with the same completeness.

The three foregoing paragraphs are a summary based upon the new insights the Vatican Council has given to the Church in the Constitution *de Ecclesia* and, in regard to its relation to the separated Churches, in the Decree on Ecumenism, especially in its second chapter.² These insights enable us to understand more exactly what we mean by the phrase 'separated brethren', and they give us a secure stepping off point for carrying out the joint dialogue and collaboration with our fellow Christians and their churches, which ecumenism involves. The opening sentence of this second chapter runs, 'Concern for the establishment of unity is a matter for the whole Church, faithful and pastors alike. Each individual is affected according to his ability'. In an earlier paragraph too the Decree has these words: 'This Sacred Synod therefore calls upon all the Catholic faithful to recognise the signs of the times and to play an informed part in the work of ecumenism'.³

The new insights of the Council into our relationship with other Christians enabled Cardinal Bea to tell us at the Heythrop Conference more than three years ago, that to hope that the separated Churches would dissolve and disappear into nothingness would be a most un-Christian attitude. Far from desiring this our attitude ought to be one of joyful readiness to help them to make their own religious life effective, and to let them have every possible assistance from our pastoral experience.⁴ Cardinal Heenan too, in his Council

²For a very complete study of what is here necessarily only touched upon, see *Structures of the Church* by Hans Küng, newly translated from the German – Burns and Oates 1965 – This book, written before the Council met, is the most scholarly and comprehensive account in English of the growth in the Church's life of its structures of teaching authority. It anticipates much of the work the Vatican Council is doing. See also a review article, *The Church as Institution* by Cornelius Ernst, O.P. in *New Blackfriars* October 1965.

³Decree C.T.S. Translation Do 351 Chapter I para. 4 page 11.

⁴*Christian Unity – A Catholic View*. Ed. J. C. Heenan. Sheed and Ward, Stag Book, 1962. page 188.

speech on the Ecumenical Decree said, 'In the name of the whole hierarchy of England and Wales, we readily declare our intention of doing everything short of denying our faith to bring about the union of Christians.'⁵

Anything short of denying our faith? The trouble is there seem to be so many things we once accepted as certain, taught by the Church, which now are freely called in question. The fires of hell, virtually extinguished; babies dying unbaptised, no longer excluded from the vision of God; indulgences, a sure means of setting us free from purgatory, now belittled if not rejected; our strict obligation under pain of mortal sin to bring up our children as Catholics by sending them to Catholic schools, now a matter for the individual conscience; contraception, the sin of sins, widely practised by Catholics, treated as a *lex dubia* by many moralists and as definitely permissible by some; the visible Church, no longer held up to be the sole way of salvation with the implication that those outside it are so strictly rationed in grace as to make their salvation extremely insecure; worse still, on the continent, it is sometimes alleged, Our Lady and the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle are belittled and pushed into a corner. And then the unchanging Mass, always there but never needing much congregational attention, now dragged into the open and almost turned into a Protestant service, in which one is urged to participate.

These and complaints like them are often heard, or seen in the Catholic press. For some the old sense of security, that the Catholic Church knows all the answers, is disappearing. 'Protestants and Humanists' a leader writer in the *Tablet* has asserted 'will say, with plenty of reason, that if the Church has been so wrong on so many and great issues, it is hard to see why they can nevertheless be expected to listen and obey'.⁶ Is this a justified censure on recent changes and discussions, does it give ground for a sense of insecurity? In what sense can the Church change its mind? Can its insights, by applying new human knowledge to the unchanging data of divine revelation, gain a truer view of the content of that revelation, impossible hitherto because the new knowledge did not exist or was slow to be recognised as true? To what has this slowness been due in the past? Has the obedient following by the *sensus fidelium* of the leading of the Holy Spirit, which Christ promised to the members of his Body, been hindered because an excessive emphasis on teaching authority and its corresponding obedience has put obstacles in the way of true freedom of the Spirit? Are we on the threshold of a great renewal of the Church's life, generated by a new spirit of love and understanding of its mission to the world? Or, are we witnessing what may prove a fatal surrender to the worldly spirit of the age, and a

⁵*Tablet* November 30 1963 page 1302.

⁶"The Supernatural Life." November 6 1965.

treachery to the true Lordship of Christ, whose kingdom is not of this world?

These questions are being asked by Catholics, and there are clearly divisions amongst us. We have pictured it graphically, and in black and white terms. It is, often, however, an instructive division, by no means fully thought out, and therefore seldom clearly formulated. Two sides of the division have labels, conservative and progressive is perhaps the most usual one. But since the edges of this division are blurred at many different points, no label is fully satisfactory and all are likely to become party slogans, at a time when the ecumenical spirit of patience and understanding and the capacity to listen is particularly needed amongst us. It may perhaps be suggested that the best classification, if any be needed, is to think of the divergence as a contrast between non-historical and historical orthodoxy.⁷ What this distinction implies is not that one side knows no history while the other does. It is that one side views the doctrinal and spiritual life of the Church, at least partially, in a kind of vacuum, where the pressures of history count for little. The other side looking at that same life sees it as constantly subject, down the centuries, to such human pressures. Both sides believe in the Holy Spirit's guidance, but historical orthodoxy views it as working in and through the historical process, non-historical orthodoxy as working apart from that process and within this divinely protected vacuum.

The conflict now present, in various degrees, in the minds of the faithful, is symbolised by these two very different approaches to the nature of revealed truth. These are clearly reflected in the passage through the Council of the Schema on Divine Revelation, the last of the three documents we are discussing in this article. The first draft of this Schema, now a Constitution, was presented and debated in the first session in November 1962. It met with very considerable opposition from the assembled bishops. Its title was 'The Sources of Revelation' and its first chapter heading 'The Two Sources'. As this shows it presupposed that, in a certain sense, revelation consists in propositions; there was no clear distinction drawn between the nature of the *res revelata* and the propositions in which the Church had formulated it. Such propositions were handed down both in Scripture and in Tradition. It was held that Tradition was wider than Scripture and at least to some extent independent of it, so that what was not in the Scriptures could be found in Tradition. Much dissatisfaction was expressed in the Council because the Schema made little room for modern biblical scholarship. There was also criticism of the way the voting on this draft was managed. In the event Pope John intervened and ordered a new mixed commission under the joint

⁷A distinction used with effect by Michael Novak in *The Open Church*, and perhaps invented by him.

presidency of Cardinals Ottaviani and Bea to rewrite the whole document.⁸

Father Gregory Baum, a member of the Secretariate of Unity, describes the new Schema, which became a dogmatic Constitution in the fourth session, as a magnificent statement on divine revelation, its transmission in the Church and on the role of the Scriptures among the Christian people. This is how he summarises its contents: 'Revelation is here no longer understood as a communication of truths, but as the self-communication of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The totality of the words and gestures of Christ, of his teaching, his life, his entire personality, is divine revelation (the *res revelata*). This doctrine will give rise to a new theological epistemology Tradition is wider than Scripture only in the sense that ultimate certitude about the meaning of all that is revealed in the Scriptures cannot be drawn from the Scriptures themselves; for this certitude the life of the Church, or Tradition, is required'.⁹ Father Baum says that the new Schema reflects the advance of biblical scholarship and Catholic theology over the last decade. He believes it will have a profound influence, more perhaps than any other Council document, upon the development of theology in the future.¹⁰

It is clear of course that the original draft of the Schema on Revelation was drawn up almost entirely from the point of view of non-historical orthodoxy, and this is evidenced by its neglect of modern biblical scholarship. Such neglect shows a failure to take account of the pressures of history exercised by new knowledge, historical and scientific, which in course of time has altered and is still altering the contemporary world-view. The new Constitution, on the other hand, is set out in terms of historical orthodoxy, which takes full account of such knowledge and enables us to see God's Word to men, not through a world view which is out of date and no longer belongs to us, but through one which modern science and historical scholarship teaches us is broadly true. That revolution began with Galileo, but is only now being fully recognised by us.

But perhaps the most important thing that the new Constitution on Divine Revelation will teach us is the clear distinction between revelation as such, the *res revelata*, and the propositions or formulations

⁸For an account of the debate on this see Rynne *Letters from the Vatican City* Chapter V page 140, Faber and Faber 1963.

⁹*The Catholic Herald* Nov. 12, p. 2.

¹⁰It is noteworthy that the Decree on Ecumenism directs: (1) That the teaching of theology and other subjects, especially history should be treated from an ecumenical viewpoint; (2) Bishops and priests should in future be equipped with a developed theology on these lines, free from the spirit of polemic, especially in matters bearing on the relations of other Christians with the Catholic Church; (3) The formation priests receive is the most important factor in the education and spiritual formation essential to the faithful and to religious. *The Decree on Ecumenism* C.T.S. Translation Do 351. Ch. II para. 10.

by which we are guided, individually and corporately, through the Holy Spirit, into a deeper understanding. The *res revelata* is God's Word to us, it is Christ himself, as Father Baum describes it in his summary of what the Constitution on revelation has to say concerning this question. The solemn definitions of the Church in creeds and councils and other teachings of its supreme magisterium are the words of man concerning the Word of God to men. They are corporately evolved under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who safeguards them from error. This is the meaning of *de fide*, containing secure guidance, because infallible. Other pronouncements of the Church's teaching authority are under God's special care, but with no guarantee beyond that, of immunity to error.

Such pronouncements of the teaching authority, whether *de fide* or not, are not and cannot be, singly or taken together, exhaustive of the whole truth of revelation. They belong to their time, they are safe guides, as long as we, the People of God, to whom God's revelation is entrusted, take full account of the fresh light new human knowledge, as it grows, can throw on the context in which we must look at the unchanging truth, as it is in Christ. This truth, the deposit of faith, needs to be constantly examined, in the light of science and history, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the Church, so that its members may distinguish what changes from what can never change, because it is God's Word.

The truth of God, which the Church possesses, may be compared to a road along which we travel to eternal life. As we travel our eyes must be fixed upon God in his Christ, for Christ is our way. Our map to guide us, is the apostolic teaching from which we derive our knowledge as it is in Christ. The eyes are eyes of faith, enlightened by the Holy Spirit; we see the truth and from it flows the life of God by which we are incorporate in Christ's Body. Our sight develops in prayer, in worship, in thought, in love, in experience of living, walking circumspectly St Paul calls it, within the context of human relationships and situations in which God has placed us. The creeds, the definitions, the moral teaching of the Church are formulas in which revealed truth, and conclusions drawn from revealed truth are embodied. These are like sign posts on the road, they direct us rightly and warn us against dangerous side roads, which lead away from the road of truth. The sign posts are good guides if we use them intelligently in conjunction with our map.

The conclusions drawn from this truth are not always so certain, though they have sometimes been put forward in current teaching as if they were. They give rise at times to controversy. But such controversy is a sign that we are alive, examining and living the truth as we journey along the road. We have consciences to live it by, and these must be active, struggling to translate the truth into right action. The individual light of the Holy Spirit, and the corporate light with which he enlightens the authority of the whole

body of the People of God, guide and instruct us. On this journey the People of God must play their appointed part, each, according to his own condition, making his own contribution, the whole together speaking the Word of God.

This is the way of historical orthodoxy. It is the way of freedom, but a freedom found in the service of God and therefore in obedience to God's authority, to which the authority of the Church is guide and servant. The Church must serve in love, and rely upon the leading of the Holy Spirit, who never fails, because he is Divine Love. The way of non-historical orthodoxy is a way in which fear of losing the truth has diminished the love which seeks the truth. Its tendency is that of all fear, it can in the end cast out love. The tendency too, it is thank God only a tendency, to identify the truth of God's revealing love more with a set of propositions than with a person has introduced an impersonal element into our common life in the Body of Christ, making it sometimes formal and individualistic. Impersonality in the exercise of authority destroys true freedom, which is love in God's service, and makes for a domination rather than a service of love. Is not this, at least in part, an explanation of the malaise that afflicts the Church today and Christianity separated from us along with it. We have no reason to be complacent or smug about our full churches when we look at the figures of our Sunday Mass attendance against our total Catholic population up and down the country, and at the apathy that characterises too many practising Catholics. We should be sympathetic too when we encounter signs of rebelliousness, it is at least an evidence of life.

Can the work done by the Council be implemented, can this begin at once? Yes, it can, given leadership and the response which always comes to true leadership. We must not be afraid when the Church seems to change its mind, or to be unable to make up its mind, in face of certain problems, and in response to a new way of looking at things created by a growing body of new knowledge. It has seemed to do so many times in the long course of its history, but in the end, in spite of change, it proves to be true to itself. Consider what our grand-parents or better our great-grand-parents thought about the way to understand the Bible, and compare it with our present understanding of it. Our reading for instance of Genesis has completely changed, yet it still teaches us the same truths as it taught to previous generations, about the creation, purpose and nature of man. The Church still teaches us that the Bible is God's Word to men, that it is inspired and contains no error, but it has now learned to see these basic truths from a very different angle, and with qualifications our ancestors could not have made, since they had not the requisite knowledge.

We stand at the beginning of a new age in the history of Christianity. In this century, for the first time, Christians have come to recognise, almost universally, within fifty years, that when they differ

conscientiously about things that divide them, whether superficially or radically, in matters of faith and practice, it is no use fighting and squabbling. The only thing to do is to come together and try to prepare the ground between us, in friendship and the desire to understand, so that God can plant the seeds of unity and make them grow. That is a tremendous step forward, and the same spirit is beginning to inspire others, men and women of good will, who do not share our faith, but who share our desire for the unity of all mankind. The Vatican Council has given us Catholics the wherewithal. We have now to set about using it with love and determination. The way will be neither short nor easy, but the purpose is urgent and the need is desperate.

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