

Comment:

Thirty Years since Vatican II

On 8 December 1965 the Vatican Council held its final session. Seven messages, each delivered by a trio of Cardinals, were issued to the following groups: rulers, scientists, artists, women, the poor, sick and suffering, workers and youth. After 'our long meditation on Christ and his Church', Pope Paul VI said (revealing *his* idea of what the Council had been about), the bishops wanted to engage the 'waiting multitudes'. From every corner of the world, he said, people 'look to the Council and ask us anxiously: *Have you not a word for us?*' — 'These pleading voices will not remain unheeded', he promised. Hence the seven words from the Council.

In the message to rulers what the Council requested, on behalf of the Church, was *liberty* — 'the liberty to believe and to preach her faith, the freedom to love her God and serve him, the freedom to live and to bring to men her message of life' — '*Do not fear her*'. Indeed, if rulers allowed such liberty, their peoples would be the first beneficiaries, 'since the Church forms for you loyal citizens, friends of social peace and progress'. This offer to form 'loyal citizens', in return for religious liberty, must have sounded strange to bishops from other parts of the world besides Eastern Europe, where faith more freely practised might only have confirmed Christians in resistance and opposition to the State.

A similar desire to play down tension may be detected in the second message. Intellectuals, scientists and other 'explorers of man, of the universe, and of history', are assured that 'never has there been so clear a possibility as today of a deep understanding between real science and real faith' — '*Have confidence in faith, this great friend of intelligence*'. Neither the rulers of this world nor the scientific community need any longer fear or distrust the Catholic Church — the old hostilities are over.

The message to artists reminds them that the Church has always been their ally and that they are 'guardians of beauty in the world' — 'May that suffice to free you from tastes which are passing and have no genuine value, to free you from the search after strange or unbecoming expressions'. Thirty years on, were *artists* the ones who needed warning against passing tastes and unbecoming expressions, in church art and music?

The Council was among the first great international assemblies to direct a message to *women* — 'you constitute half of the immense human family'. The Church is proud to have 'glorified and liberated

woman', 'to have brought into relief her basic equality with man'. Who is the Church, there, one might ask. Anyway, some of her tasks seem to make woman more equal than man. Whatever the harmony between science and religion, technology 'runs the risk of becoming inhuman', and women are the ones called to mount the resistance — 'Hold back the hand of man who, in a moment of folly, might attempt to destroy the human race'. As 'first educators of the human race', women are also urged to 'pass on to your sons and daughters the traditions of your fathers (*sic*)'. Thus, women are responsible for the future of the world as well as for transmitting the best of the past. They know how to 'make truth sweet, tender, and accessible' — which is why it falls to them to 'bring the spirit of the Council into institutions, schools, homes and daily life'. (So if the spirit of the Council never reached you, or indeed if it did and you don't like it, you know who to blame!)

The 'Christian science of suffering', so the poor, sick and suffering are told, is 'the only one which gives peace' — 'You are the brothers of the suffering Christ, and with him, if you wish, you are saving the world'. As regards the workers, 'regrettable misunderstandings have, over too long a period, maintained a spirit of mistrust and lack of understanding between us, and both the Church and the working-class have suffered from this'. However, 'the echo which recent pontifical encyclicals have found in your ranks has proved to what degree the soul of the working man of our time was attuned to that of his highest spiritual leaders'. Ordinary Catholics felt Pope John XXIII understood them, that must mean.

Finally, 'young men and women of the world' are warned not to yield, as some of their elders have been tempted to, to 'the seductions of egoistic or hedonistic philosophies or to those of despair and annihilation'. In face of atheism, quaintly described as 'a phenomenon of lassitude and old age', they should affirm their faith in 'the certitude of a just and good God'. 'Rich with a long past ever living in her, and marching on toward human perfection in time and the ultimate destinies of history and of life, the Church is the real youth of the world'. The Church 'possesses what constitutes the strength and the charm of youth, that is to say, the ability to rejoice with what is beginning, to give oneself unreservedly, to renew oneself and to set out again for new conquests' — a peroration that recalls what many felt about Vatican II at the time, rightly or wrongly.

F.K.