

CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

2008 Conference Papers

Vatican II and the Church to Come

Introduction

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There were struggles enough during the Second Vatican Council's production of the final versions of the conciliar documents but they were eventually accepted, not overwhelmingly, but by a very large majority of the bishops. Compromises might have been made in their wording but there can be no question that they authoritatively represent the teaching of the Catholic Church. Yet more than forty years after the close of the Council, there are disturbing tensions in the Church as various individuals and groups take up their positions, not so much on how to interpret the words of the texts but on how to "receive" the inheritance of the Council. For some the inheritance implies little change from what went before in the immediate post-war period, for others it means shaking off the past, although it was never likely that a meeting of academic theologians would see the decade after the war as a golden age when some of the greatest minds behind the Council were silenced and exiled. It was, then, the aim of the conference of the CTA in 2008 to review the outcome of the Council forty years on and to consider what the Church might now become in the future.

What we find in general in these papers is not an ecclesiastical ideology, liberal or otherwise; nor an insistence on interpreting the conciliar documents in just *this* way; nor an interpretation of the Council that stress a continuity with previous centuries or a radical discontinuity with what went before; but an understanding of the Council being an event which opened new possibilities which would be part of a process of development that would continue long after the Council itself was over.

The title of Paul Lakeland's opening paper 'Lumen Gentium: The Unfinished Business' sums up this approach. Lakeland adopts "renewal" as his watchword and he focuses on four theologians of the Council, all born coincidentally in 1904: Lonergan, Rahner, Congar and John Courtney Murray, to help us understand how the Council

began this process of renewal and how it might be continued. He points to Yves Congar, one of the architects of *Lumen Gentium*, having second-thoughts about some of his earlier ideas which had influenced LG, as an example of why it is important “not to canonize the particular insights of LG. If *aggiornamento/ressourcement* is the theological method of refreshing the Church, it is the method rather than this or that particular judgment that needs to be the focus of unfinished business.”

Karen Kilby recommends Karl Rahner in a comparable way. She expresses reservations about some of his particular judgments and proposals, some of which are now just taken for granted and some of which seem more a transient product of the 60s, but what we can learn is “something to do with broad orientation, with tone, manner, with underlying presuppositions and approach. . .elusive and hard to pin down” perhaps but which is “enormously important for theology”. Kilby also tells us how Rahner stressed the temporality of the Church, its historical situatedness in the world. Paul Hypher draws on his experience as a student, hearing Rahner lecture in Austria, to place Rahner in his own historical context in order to provide a framework for a broader understanding of his theology.

Kilby lists things that certainly have changed since the Council and tells how Rahner (presciently in the light of some later trends) emphasised their irreversibility. Stephen Bullivant chronicles one of these changes: the Church’s attitude to atheism and atheists, from a pre-conciliar antagonism and condemnation to dialogue based on a wish for mutual understanding. Anthony Carroll shows how such changes, encapsulated in *Gaudium et Spes*, opened new ways for Catholics to approach the world outside the Church, which in turn saw the beginning of a Catholic theology of modernity. As the Catholic Church had rejected modernity (and specifically what it called “modernism”) before the Council, a Protestant, and largely German Protestant theory of the modern, derived principally from Max Weber, dominated. That is, before it got secularised more recently. Now, Carroll argues, a specifically Catholic theology awaits development which relates the Church to culture (and which appreciates ways in which the Church has in fact fostered this relationship in its past) but which eschews relativism and an aggressive secularity, a theology which acknowledges the world but does not cave in to all its values.

At the conference Anthony Towey led an interactive session which analysed the constitution on scripture, *Dei Verbum*, and asked if it was still “fit for purpose”. The document was still able to elicit a very positive response, despite the expression of some minor reservations about particular issues such as inerrancy. Here in this collection we have Towey’s account of the production of *Dei Verbum* and how it helped change Catholic attitudes to the Bible and initiated a new wave of scholarship.

James Leachman's approach to liturgy after Vatican II is rather different. Taking for granted liturgical developments since the Council, he introduces us to a method he has developed for analysing one particular liturgical text – the collect – as a way of renewing our appreciation of ancient traditions and new developments. All this is in the name of making the richness of the liturgy more accessible, in parallel with the work of his colleague, Daniel McCarthy (happily present at the conference) in his weekly column in *The Tablet*.

Despite the Council not having produced a document on moral teaching, it had a profound effect on how Catholics think about moral matters. Gerard Mannion surveys the shift in attitudes generally in moral thinking and in methods among moral theologians that had begun even before the Council had met, changes which continued in the period that saw the publication of Paul VI's *Humanae vitae* and the reactions that followed. He hopes for a time when the Church might relax its need for certitude in these matters.

Finally Jim Sweeney brings us full circle by asking how the Council will be remembered: as embodying doctrine expressed permanently in texts, or as an event that brought fresh attitudes and perspectives into the Church. He emphatically suggests the latter. However, in his sociological analysis, Sweeney lists those areas where what the Council promised has even now not been fulfilled, as he responds to the revisionist interpretation of the history of the Council that some think is being devised to minimise the changes that the Council Fathers hoped for. So the business of Vatican II goes on, taking the best traditions of the past into an ever-changing future.

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