

The beginnings of the beginning – or the end of the new song? The Second Vatican Council and the ongoing development

Authorized short version of a talk held in Würzburg on November 8th 2008 during the 24th assembly of the movement "We are Church" by P. Wolfgang Seibel SJ, observer of the Council and long-standing editor of the journal "Stimmen der Zeit" of the Jesuits in Munich.

2nd Vatican Council: Reform – Dialogue – People of God

Reform. Pope John 23rd had invited to the Council because he was convinced that the Church was in dire need for fundamental reforms. The Council was intended to initiate a "Renewal of the whole Church". The Pope was convinced that this reform could only be achieved by shared consideration, and open argument, only if as many as possible laypersons and those holding an office would contribute and bring in their knowledge and experience. He did not accept solving problems by directives or decree. The Church shall "renew itself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit incessantly" (GS21). It is "obliged to study the signs of the present time and to interpret them in the light of the holy Bible" (GS4).

Dialogue is already the basis of the Council as such. It is the usual way for the Council to find the truths and to come to decisions. The Council declares without doubt that the Church as such does not have a predefined answer to all questions (GS 43) but has to search for the answers itself. For the first time in the history of the Church the Council has indicated that diversity of opinion is possible and legitimate.

The Council doesn't evaluate and consider our modern times as "negative" in principle – although that happened so for a very long period in Church history– but it finds a lot of positive facts in these "modern times". The maxim and motto is no longer "objection and demarcation" but "opening and dialogue" instead. The Church of the Council does not want to appear to order, instruct and demand but wants to have the new image of a church ready to argue which must, almost by consensus come to an understanding. It was completely new that official statements of the Catholic teaching went so far.

The most important decision of the Council is the declaration on religious freedom. That point turned upside down the old teaching. The freedom in religious themes is founded in the dignity of man itself and hence that right not derived from any law of state. It has to be respected by the states because of that fundamental foundation in Dignity. Religious freedom is a "right vested in any person", it is "independent of objective reasoning of the individual religious conviction and independent of subjective striving for that truth".

Dialogue is the basis of the Council's statements concerning ecumenism and the non-Christian religions. The Second Vatican Council emphasizes – differently to many centuries before – that also in the other religions there is truth and holiness.

"People of God" is the key term of the new image of the Church: The second Vatican Council wanted to overcome the image of a two- class community under the dominant clerical class. For the Council there are no Christians of lesser right. "People of God" means the strengthening of the local units of the Church. The bishops together with the Pope form a body of cooperating colleagues. They are not deputies and not clerks of the Pope.

The tremendous resonance that the Council found within the Catholic Church is a sign most clearly showing that the bishops identified the problems in a similar way as the majority of the Catholic people and that jointly they addressed the same problems. Rarely can one find such a great consensus between bishops and the People of God.

Open Questions the Council left to posterity:

- The question concerning contraception:

Pope Paul 6th wanted to decide on this in his encyclical "Humanae vitae" in 1968. The encyclical was not accepted in life practice by the Catholic community – a sign showing that clerical teaching may decide on questions of faith and morals, however that clerics are not in the position anymore to force these decisions into acceptance by the People of God..

- The question of celibacy is still a matter of discussion.

- The discussion concerning the question whether other religions can be regarded as a way to salvation of their own right is today of much greater relevance and receives more ardent recognition than in previous times.

- The existence of very serious questions concerning the unequal treatment of women by the Church was not in the focus of the Council for unknown reasons.

- Also the question of the remarried divorced men and women was no topic then.

- The central question of the nomination of bishops was not addressed either.

Deficits

The Pope is still perceived as an absolute monarch. The one-sidedness of the First Vatican Council is still valid without any reduction. The bishops still are a kind of clerks that have to conform to the directives of the Pope. As a counterbalance they have got some more power in their dioceses where they are kind of a "small popes".

Large sections of the Council's decisions are still contaminated by patriarchal thoughts. The laypersons still are seen as subordinate citizens, as passive receivers of what those in office graciously donate to them.

The relationship between Pope and bishops, between bishops and priests and the People of God in their dioceses was not formally regulated by the Council in a juridical and institutional way. Obligations and especially those of obedience are only with those who are subordinate. For the higher ranks there are only moral admonitions and appeals. So you find that the bishops should "gladly" make use of the advice of laypersons. What laypersons propose the bishops should "take into consideration attentively in God" (LG 37). If the Council hoped that such admonitions and the ideal familial interaction between "shepherd" and "flock" should suffice, this sounds like "romanticism not of this world" (Peter Hünemann). As long as it is not canonically and juridically written down when and how bishops have to accept advice, the old ways will persist. Many bishops don't have the perception that there is an undisputable need for juridical regulations in this area.

Rome

The policy of the Pope and the Curia today

In fact most of the decisions and documents of the Council – except those concerning religious freedom – have been "slowed down almost to a halt" by the Curia in Rome (Wolfgang Beinert). They often have been replaced by opposite resolutions.

„Rarely in Church history (did) a minority, which was not even qualified, afterwards, in an at least careless – if not shameless and impertinent – way make use of the ambiguities of the texts of the Council, forcefully brought about by them, in order to be victorious on the paths of tradition, ignoring the clear intention of the majority of the representatives of the universal Church.” (Otto Hermann Pesch)

Today it is less possible than ever to talk about the independence of the local Churches. In fact, the bishops cannot do anything else but receive the orders of the Pope and the Curia. The statements of the Council that the bishops must be considered the “representatives and messengers of Christ” and not the “representatives of the bishops of Rome” (LG 27) have simply been left out in the Corpus Iuris Canonici of 1983. Today the bishops are as powerless as they ever were and are almost non-existent

“as partners in an open discussion of controversial questions in the Church. They are under such a pressure to act loyally that they have to defend whatever Rome orders.” (Otto Hermann Presch)

The Council probably suffered its greatest defeat in its endeavours to reduce centralism.

The heaviest attack on the reform of the liturgy was the reinstatement of the old Tridentine rite in 2007. This is a clear disapproval of the Council. The Pope seems to be ready “to question more than ever the achievements of the Second Vatican Council.” (Klaus Nientiedt, HK 8/2008).

Words of the theologian and philosopher *Eugen Biser* on June 26, 2000: “We live...in a phase which I must call the abolition of the achievements of the Second Vatican Council. Everything that that Council gave us as a present is being demolished and withdrawn piece after piece. And a Church which does this, which commits such acts of self-destruction, does not need any enemies, because it works self-sufficiently towards its own ruin and lack of acceptance.”

This is a rather gloomy picture of the actual situation of the Church. But we have to face the realities and it does not make sense to foster illusions. Certainly such an analysis of the situation must not be the last word. After all, the Church does not consist only of the Pope, the Curia and the bishops. Where the “Church” or “People of God” is truly alive, at the grassroots level, in the parishes, there nothing hinders us to follow the guidelines of Vatican II and to live according to its impulses for the future.

Finally, during the whole history of the Church, all new ideas, all good initiatives for the future, all impulses for reforms always have come from below. The hierarchy has been more involved in reducing speed and in controlling, as far as this has been possible. When the Second Vatican Council was summoned, it was the first time that the initiative for something new came from high up, from the Pope himself. The papal initiative, however, was limited to summoning the Council and maintaining it against all resistance, which came mainly from the Roman Curia. The Council could only succeed to such a degree, because its ways had already been prepared from below, from the basic level. Just think of the theological breakthroughs in the first half of the 20th century, the endeavours to renew the liturgy, the Bible movement, the ecumenical movement, the youth movement and a lot more. It would be the worst reaction to the present course of the Church hierarchy to fall into resignation. That would only help the opponents of the conciliar renewal. On the contrary, hope and courageous activity are necessary. We must do everything to rescue the initiatives of the Council from disappearing and to make sure that they permeate the life of the Church.

Conclusion: In Rome the end of the new song. At the grassroots level, however, a new beginning is always possible. Nobody is obliged – against his or her conscience – to accept the decisions of the hierarchy as just or as the last word. It is there that ways are open to further development and renewal of the Church according to the Second Vatican Council, if only we have the courage to act with conviction. It is there that the Church is alive and the future will be formed.

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