

## ***Time for a new reception of Vatican II***

One of the most encouraging aspects of Pope Francis's ministry over the past three years is his clear and unambiguous commitment to recovering the teaching and inspiration of the Second Vatican Council which, shortly after his election, he described as, "the beautiful work of the Holy Spirit." If ever there was a time when the People of God needs the Holy Spirit to recreate the 'beautiful work' of renewal and reform of the Church it is now.<sup>1</sup> Some thoughts are offered here on what may be required of the Church, both the universal and local, in order to respond afresh to the vision and the challenges of Vatican II.

### ***Non reception of Vatican II and the domestication of the Local Church***

In recent years, theologians Massimo Faggioli and Richard Gaillardetz among many others have demonstrated that neither John Paul II nor Benedict XVI had shown that they had fully received a number of Vatican II's key doctrines. Among them are collegiality, the integrity and transparency of the synodal system, and subsidiarity in Church leadership and governance. With subsidiarity greatly eroded, the teaching authority of Episcopal Conferences was further diminished and, with it, their right to determine important regional aspects of doctrine, church order and liturgical life.

In the *Motu Proprio*, "Apostolos Suos" of May 21, 1998 John Paul II quietly wrote down Vatican II's provisions relating to Episcopal conferences in Vatican II's *Christus Dominus*. John Paul's theological justification was an appeal to the 'wishes' of the 1985 Synod of Bishops which was heavily influenced by Cardinal Ratzinger's now famous 'state of the Catholic Church' intervention. The substance of his address can be read in *The Ratzinger Report* published that same year. In Cardinal Kasper's view, Cardinal Ratzinger's assessment of the reception of Vatican II amounted to a massive distortion of its theology and intention. Kasper strongly rebuked Ratzinger and accused him of abusing his authority as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and eroding the integrity of the Council's magisterium. Furthermore, Kasper blamed Ratzinger for establishing a divisive policy of historical revisionism and doing so under the aegis of John Paul II.

In defending Vatican II's ecclesiology, Cardinal Kasper pointed out that doctrine is not pre-existent or limited to some sort of fixed notional deposit. Doctrine grows naturally and organically out of the reflection by the People of God on their experience. This is how best theology is done because it has precisely the grounded human experience as its source of investigation.<sup>2</sup> The tension between the Kasper view and that of Ratzinger still exists and perhaps even more obviously so now following the theologically polarised debates of the 2014-2015 Roman Synods on the Family.

Benedict's idealistic notions of the Universal Church as a divinely willed institution shares much in common with Pius XII's June 1943 Encyclical letter *Mystici Corporis Christi*. When he taught about the nature, purpose and governance of the Church, Pius rightly stressed the existential realities of its ministry in the world. His principal focus was, however, very heavily concentrated on the *supernatural, divine origins* and hierarchical structure of the Church. This theological description of Church ultimately allowed little or no room for its reform and renewal. The Church was presented as the perfect, complete, changeless and closed system.<sup>4</sup> It is no wonder that the Roman Curia, so conditioned by this kind of ecclesiology, was so resistant to Pope John XXIII's call for an Ecumenical Council.

As recently as March, 2016 Cardinal Gerhard Müller, the current Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, reaffirmed the essence of Pius XII's teaching on the divine origins of the Church. Rejecting any need for Catholics to celebrate Luther's Reformation, Müller went on to insist that the origins and hierarchical structures of the Catholic Church were directly willed by God and that all of this is grounded in the ordained priesthood. Cardinal Müller says in the new book:

‘ If we are convinced that divine revelation is preserved whole and unchanged through Scripture and Tradition, in the doctrine of the Faith, in the sacraments, in the hierarchical constitution of the Church by divine right, founded on the sacrament of holy orders, we cannot accept that there exist sufficient reasons to separate from the Church ... <sup>3</sup>

A few years earlier, there were other ambit claims which caused serious concern for many Catholics. Pope Benedict's October 2011 "Motu Proprio" *Porta Fidei* set out the rationale and agenda for the Year of Faith. The letter proposed that the *definitive* interpretation of the Second Vatican Council subsists in the teachings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI and that the *Magisterium* of these two popes is further distilled in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. As it later became clear, this was a last ditch effort to impose the doctrinal legacy of two popes as the instrument of interpretation of Vatican II. This constituted a spectacular instance of grave non-reception of Vatican II and the *Sensus Fidei Fidelium* ('sense of faith of the faithful') which supports it.

Irish theologian Joseph O'Leary comments on this kind of revisionism:

There is no way of divorcing the authentic sense of Vatican II from that authentic sense enacted by Paul VI and the Council Fathers in the years immediately following the Council. What is much easier to do is to see the inconsistency between the work of the Council and its dismantling in recent decades.<sup>4</sup>

This view is supported by the extraordinary body of theology of *reception* and its opposite which has emerged over the last decade or so. Now a number of theologians have applauded the new Pope's commitment to getting Vatican II's message to speak for itself once again without being put through an ideological filtration plant run by interest groups unfriendly towards the Council.

Time is running out very fast if far reaching systemic reform and renewal in the Catholic Church are to become reality. In the brief years of Francis' papacy so far, there has been no

shortage of encouragement by him to reappropriate the reforming vision of Vatican II, beginning at the grass roots level of the local Church. Among the key Vatican II doctrinal initiatives espoused by Pope Francis are the priority of subsidiarity in Church governance especially the responsibility of the local communities to assume adult responsibility for their own self regulation. This is not just some kind of romantic nostalgia but a rational reappropriation of the Council's unfinished work principal among which is the ongoing working out and interpretative voice of the *Sensus Fidei Fidelium*.

Francis and his successor must carry out decisive and deep seated reforms of the Roman Curia. Even since it was formed by Gregory VII in the eleventh century, the Curia has taken on a life of its own and has evolved to a stage where it has become a practically self-perpetuating, self-serving church within the Church. It most definitely needs to be deconstructed and the subculture of clericalism which supports it thoroughly de-legitimised. Furthermore, it is time that professionally qualified lay women and men are appointed to many of the senior positions of ecclesiastical governance. Support for this kind of reorganisation comes from American Canon Lawyer, Fr Tom Doyle OP who has identified what he believes are the fundamental problems blocking systemic reform of the Curia. Doyle points the finger at a stratified, socially schizophrenic Church structure which is further handicapped by a centralised and deeply entrenched sub-culture of clericalism. <sup>5</sup>

### ***Removing the blocks to lasting reform and renewal in the Church***

Addressing the place and role of the Roman Curia in the Church, Pope Francis has observed:

“The Curia” manages the services that serve the Holy See. But it has one defect: it is Vatican-centric. It sees and looks after the interests of the Vatican, which are still, for the most part, temporal interests. This Vatican-centric view neglects the world around us. I do not share this view and I'll do everything I can to change it. The Church is or should go back to being a community of God's people, and priests, pastors and bishops who have the care of souls, are at the service of the people of God.” <sup>6</sup>

It is a matter of history that the mandate for the Second Vatican Council came from above, through the inspiration and mandate of Pope John XXIII both of which were validated by the College of Bishops. The historical record also reveals that the lasting, systemic reform and renewal of the Church received their oxygen and impetus at the local level when diocesan bishops and clergy, together with their people interpreted and applied the teaching of the Council to their own particular needs.

The major source of resistance to Vatican II, from the beginning up to and including the present time is the Roman Curia backed by entrenched clerical and lay conservatives popularly called the *Semper Idem* ('Always the same' Party). In modern times, Popes since John XXIII have attempted significant structural and cultural change of the Roman Curia but with little success. Pope Francis has indicated that he too is serious about reforming what he describes as a culture of narcissism and a leprosy in the Church. <sup>7</sup>

One of the theologians who most profoundly influenced Jorge Bergoglio in his apostolate among the marginalised and alienated was the French Dominican theologian, Yves Congar. His 1950 theological reflections on authentic reform and renewal in the Church helped shape the thinking of a future Pope. Congar wrote:

“Initiatives often start at the periphery. They say that history develops at the margins and that’s right. The margin is closer to the periphery than the centre. Further, the centre, with its vocation to oversee structure, prefers something *defined* to something that is searching and striving for expression. Yet a spiritual organism is more likely to grow out of the elements searching and striving for expression.”<sup>8</sup>

Just few days before he was elected Pope in March, 2013, Jorge Bergoglio addressed the pre-Conclave Congregation of Cardinals:

“There is a tension between the centre and the periphery. .... We must get out of ourselves and go toward the periphery. We must avoid the spiritual disease of the Church that can become self-absorbed; when this happens, the Church becomes sick.... Between the Church that goes into the street and gets into an accident and a Church that is sick with self-referentiality, I have no doubts in preferring the first.”<sup>9</sup>

Another symptom of this ecclesiastical ‘sickness’ is the paralysis among bishops around the world to exercise their legitimate independence and ecclesial mandate given at ordination. Too many bishops world-wide lost their nerve, especially during the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI and they have allowed themselves to be subverted, infantilised and controlled by sectional interest groups that German Cardinal Lehmann describes as ‘unauthorised’ people in Rome.<sup>10</sup>

Pope Francis has made it perfectly clear in *Evangelii Gaudium* that the closely scrutinised micromanagement of local dioceses, which was a feature of the John Paul II – Benedict XVI papacies, is over and subsidiarity is back. Consequently, there is no excuse for the local bishops to claim they have no competence in matters which are clearly within their duty and responsibility. They are not branch managers of a multinational corporation but pastors to the people of their own particular church.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Thinking locally, acting boldly and with imagination***

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has proposed that a National Plenary Council will take place in **2020**. Archbishop Coleridge explained that two of the main reasons for the bishops’ proposal were the continuing decline in participation rates among Australian Catholics and the fallout from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The two are obviously related in no small way. The likely effect of the Royal Commission’s ‘*Catholic wrap-up*’ in early 2017 will precipitate a further, perhaps drastic, exodus from the pews.

The bishops of Australia can no longer afford to forfeit courage and imagination to introspection and inertia. There will be three years between the Royal Commission’s report, the ensuing, inevitable blow-back and the National Plenary in 2020. Time is short and the stakes are high.

In preparation for the National Council, every territorial bishop should be preparing by holding a series of 'listening assemblies'. These need to be completely transparent in composition, content and process, ensure wide representation of the faithful, and impose no restrictions on agenda items. The results of these regional listening assemblies should shape the substance of the working document for the National Plenary which should also be completely transparent in composition, content and process, with wide representation of the faithful.

Given the critical shortage of priests, the Catholic Bishops of Australia might follow the example of Brazilian Bishop Erwin Kräutler who in early 2014 petitioned Pope Francis that he authorise the ordination of married men to meet the pressing pastoral need in his diocese. Francis told Kräutler that he was open to the idea but that an official request had to come from the national Bishops' Conference and that they needed to be courageous in their resolve.<sup>12</sup>

The Australian Bishops Conference would contribute greatly to the decentralisation of Church authority if it acted decisively to have the Latinised Missal of 2011 archived and, with the other English language jurisdictions, to have the highly acclaimed 1998 ICEL translation authorised.

Another step in the direction of rebuilding the sacramental life of the Australian Church would be to restore the Third Rite of Reconciliation which was autocratically suppressed by John Paul II. Other initiatives would involve working with other Episcopal Conferences to persuade the Pope-in-Synod to delink the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick from the ordained priesthood and to authorise suitably prepared pastoral associates to be co-ministers of the Sacrament.

Catholics today are facing perhaps the most critical challenges they have had to deal with for over a thousand years. Vatican II provided a powerful and courageous example of what can happen when the Catholic Church encountered massive shifts in global culture, economics, politics and unparalleled demographic dislocation and relocation. The Church resisted the temptation to retreat into self-absorption, introspection and defensiveness. It drew on its ancient memory of the massive readjustments which were demanded when it experienced more substantial spiritual, theological and social change in the first fifty years of its existence than in the thousand years after. That's quite a precedent.

## Endnotes

- 1) "In the Bull of Indiction for this current extraordinary holy year of Mercy, Francis stresses the "great need" to keep Vatican II "alive," because -- among other things -- it was "a true breath of the Holy Spirit" and it gave the Church a sense of "responsibility to be a living sign of the Father's love in the world." He continues by quoting Paul VI's address at the close of Vatican II, saying, "A wave of affection and admiration flowed from the council over the modern world of humanity. ... messages of trust issued from the council to the present-day world. The modern world's values were not only respected but honored, its efforts approved, its aspirations purified and blessed. ..." Pope Francis calls the council as a "new phase" of the Church's history. It is one where the Church is more fully immersed in the world, in dialogue with its people and the channel of God's mercy towards sinners, the poor, the weak and the marginalized. And as Bishop of Rome he obviously sees his mission as reviving this project that was begun at the council, but which was severely crippled by a mentality of retreat, restoration and self-referentialism. Not everyone in the Church shares Francis' vision, as we all know. But according to one Italian bishop, that's because they are really at

- odds with the Second Vatican Council.” Robert Mickens, “Mercy, Vatican II comes alive,” *NCR* Dec. 7, 2015. ([HERE](#))
- 2) “Regrettably, Cardinal Ratzinger has approached the problem of the relationship between the universal church and local churches from a purely abstract and theoretical point of view, without taking into account concrete pastoral situations and experiences.” “On the Church,” *America Magazine* April 23, 2001. ([HERE](#)) Joseph Ratzinger, “The Local Church and the Universal Church,” *America Magazine*, November 19, 2001, ([HERE](#)); A related article: Thomas Reese, “Church reform requires decentralization, synodality,” *NCR* Feb. 11, 2016. ([HERE](#))
  - 3) Staff Reporter, “Reformation is nothing to celebrate, says Cardinal Müller,” *The Catholic Herald*, Thursday, 31 Mar 2016.
  - 4) *Pray Tell*, 29/11/11; related: Massimo Faggioli, *A Council for the Global Church. Receiving Vatican II in History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015); Richard R. Gaillardetz, *An Unfinished Council*. 141-148.
  - 5) “It will take more than papal pronouncements to bring about the changes in direction that are essential. It will take a fundamental change in attitude and this will not be evident as long as the hierarchy still believes that the church is a stratified society with the bishops on top and the vast majority of believers on the bottom, whose only duty, according to Pope Pius X, is to obey and docilely follow the bishops.” - “Pope calls bishops’ negligence a crime: this is important,” *NCR*, Jun. 17, 2016.
  - 6) Thomas C. Fox, “Francis: Papal Court is ‘leprosy of papacy’” *NCR* Oct. 1, 2013.
  - 7) Matthew Deluca, “Pope Francis digs at Vatican’s narcissistic nature, calls for change,” *NBC News*, Oct. 1, 2013.
  - 8) *True and False Reform in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 240. Original French title, *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l’Eglise* (Paris: Ed du Cerf, 1950). Congar taught that true reform “was always rooted in pastoral concern for ordinary faithful people: it was oriented to, and shaped by, the periphery, not the center.” In his biography of Bergoglio, Austen Ivereigh wrote that, following Congar’s theology of Church, Bergoglio launched his programs and initiatives with the exhortation to go out to the peripheries and, once there, not to impose an “ideology” but to learn from the people—from the *santo pueblo fiel de Dios*, “God’s holy faithful people.” The *pueblo fiel* serve as “the hermeneutic of true reform.” (See, Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer. Francis and the making of a radical Pope*, London, Allen & Unwin, 2014); see also Ivereigh’s, “A Papal Manifesto: Francis’s Ode to the Joy of the Gospel” *ABC Religion and Ethics Report* 2 Dec. 2013 ([HERE](#))

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis continued to elaborate on the theme of Church as a servant of the Gospel not its end: “Everyone can share in some way in the life of the Church: everyone can be part of the community, nor should the doors of the sacraments be closed for simply any reason. This is especially true of the sacrament which is itself “the door:” baptism. The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak. These convictions have pastoral consequences that we are called to consider with prudence and boldness. Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems” (EG 47).

- 9) Cardinal Jaime Lucas Ortega y Alamino, the archbishop of Havana, Cuba, was given the notes of the speech by Cardinal Bergoglio himself published it in a letter to the people of his Archdiocese on his return from the Conclave. The full text is below.\*

10) CNS, “Cardinal says ‘unauthorized people’ in Rome veto bishop picks” *Crux. Taking the Catholic Pulse*, May 5, 2016 ([HERE](#))

11) “Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound ‘decentralization.’” (*EG* 16; see *EG* 32 which, speaking of Episcopal Conferences, states that they are in a position, “to contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit.”).

Pope Francis again:

"We can say, therefore, that the mandate you have received from the Council was precisely to 'push' the lay faithful to get more and more involved and, better at it, in the evangelizing mission of the Church, not as 'delegates' of the hierarchy, but because [the lay] apostolate [means] 'participation in the salvific mission of the Church, to which all are disciples of the Lord through Baptism and Confirmation'. It is Baptism that makes every lay faithful a missionary disciple of the Lord, salt of the earth, light of the world, yeast that transforms reality from within." - Vatican Radio, “Pope to last Plenary of Council for Laity,” 17/06/16 ([HERE](#))

12) Pope Francis told Bishop Kräutler that the national Bishops’ Conferences should achieve consensus and bring their proposal to Rome. Francis was quite clear on this point: “It was up to the bishops to make suggestions.” Asked whether it now depended on bishops’ conferences as to whether Church reforms proceeded or not, Bishop Kräutler replied, “yes.” *The Tablet* April 10, 2014.

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\*Addendum: Below is a copy of the 4 minute speech delivered by Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio at the ‘Congregations of Bishops’ in Rome days before he was elected Pope.

### *Evangelizing Implies Apostolic Zeal*

1. Evangelizing pre-supposes a desire in the Church to come out of herself. The Church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also the existential peripheries: the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents, and of all misery.

2. When the Church does not come out of herself to evangelize, she becomes self-referential and then gets sick. (cf. The deformed woman of the Gospel [Luke 13:10-17]). The evils that, over time, happen in ecclesial institutions have their root in self-referentiality and a kind of theological narcissism. In Revelation, Jesus says that he is at the door and knocks [Rev. 3:20].

Obviously, the text refers to his knocking from the outside in order to enter but I think about the times in which Jesus knocks from within so that we will let him come out. The self-referential Church keeps Jesus Christ within herself and does not let him out.

3. When the Church is self-referential, inadvertently, she believes she has her own light; she ceases to be the *mysterium lunae* [Latin, “mystery of the moon,” i.e., reflecting the light of Christ the way the moon reflects the light of the sun] and gives way to that very serious evil, spiritual worldliness (which according to de Lubac, is the worst evil that can befall the Church). It lives to give glory only to one another.

Put simply, there are two images of the Church: Church which evangelizes and comes out of herself, the *Dei Verbum religiose audiens et fidente proclamans* [Latin, “Hearing the word of God with reverence and proclaiming it with faith”]; and the worldly Church, living within herself, of herself, for herself. This should shed light on the possible changes and reforms which must be done for the salvation of souls.

4. Thinking of the next pope: He must be a man who, from the contemplation and adoration of Jesus Christ, helps the Church to go out to the existential peripheries that helps her to be the fruitful mother, who gains life from “the sweet and comforting joy of evangelizing.”