

**The Spirit of the Second Vatican Council fifty years on**  
Address to English-speaking students at Sankta Eugenia  
3<sup>rd</sup> of February 2013

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On an almost daily basis we read something on the “Arab Spring”, even if the spring is over since a long time ago. It turned into a revolution and it was difficult to have a clear overview of what actually was happening. After some time the heat of the revolution was quenched and the compromises of realpolitik and a multifaceted reality took hold of the fire. The revolutionary summer became autumn in an immense variety of colours to start with, becoming grey and brown by time. Fortunately, we have seen few headlines of an “Arab winter”, still less of permafrost, despite the tragedy going on in Syria.

This metaphor helps us interpret the situation in the Catholic Church before, during and after the Second Vatican Council which took place between the 11<sup>th</sup> of October 1962 and the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1965. I was only a schoolchild during those years, but I still remember some news pictures on television which was quite new in Sweden at that time. But I definitely lived the revolution of the Council as a student during the 1970ties. My generation was the first one to enjoy the fruits of the Council in a kind of revolution when everything was possible but also the one to face the realpolitik of the Church not without some sort of frustration, some years later. Generally speaking though, the breaking up of spring, the revolution of summer and the realpolitik of autumn prove to be rather helpful interpretive keys of the Council and what happened afterwards.

We have to look at the Council as *an event* with a pre-history, an actuality, a reception process and an unknown future. Some say that it takes up to fifty to one hundred years for a council to be realized in the life of the Church. And the rapidity of development in today’s society doesn’t seem to reduce this number of years. So when I am talking of the Council it will be as an event and I will also put an emphasis on *its ethos*, its spirit. We will never be able to understand the thorough transformation of the Church that the Council brought about unless we look at these two fundamental issues, the Council as an event and its ethos. The Council led to a change of the life of the Church in its totality, and still it was the same Church. In many respect, it was a change in style, the life-style of the Church, but also of a linguistic style, of a new approach to faith as such. The Council wrote sixteen documents, but it has to be underlined, it never took any legal decisions! It didn’t promulgate any laws or particular rules, although it made several statements. This is in part the difficulty we have to handle today. We inherited a *spirit* of the Council, and we are invited to act in its *ethos*, but we cannot refer to any legal regulations. To follow in the steps of the Council is more about maturing in a particular behaviour and attitude rather than

implementing a set of rules. We are left with an *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, a Church in continuous reform!

So we are left with a challenge! As we all know, a living Tradition is like the medieval dance, three steps forward and two backwards. We have to refer to our roots, to the sources of our faith, to the whole history while we are steadily walking ahead towards a horizon that is in continuous expansion, always drawing us towards a surprisingly new future. The pitfall is to go backwards, to end up in permafrost where the faith is reduced to a dead doctrine, to an artefact which has its place in a museum and not in real life. This is what one of the key notions that Pope John XXIII pronounced for the Council, the *aggiornamento*, an ongoing updating of the Church, wanted to prevent.

### **How did the Council come about?**

We now turn to the immediate pre-history of the Council. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1959, in the basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, Pope John XXIII announced that an Ecumenical Council would be celebrated. He proclaimed two personal intentions with the Council, an ecumenical openness and *aggiornamento*. As we shall see further on, this was like an earthquake for the Curia, yes, for the whole Roman leadership, and the initiative was met with a complete silence.

Obviously, the date, the place and the intentions are intertwined and have a deeper meaning than being just any announcement of the Pope. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of January we are celebrating both the conversion of the Apostle Saint Paul and the closing of the week of prayer for Christian Unity. The symbol of doing this in a basilica “outside the walls” means that the event of this Council would not only be limited to the Church, it would be open to the whole world. John XXIII held out his hand to all other Christians, to all other people of good will, and showed a determination to lead the Church to a necessary conversion in this process. This undertaking required an *aggiornamento*, an updating of the life-style of the Church, a new way of speaking of the faith. Ecumenical openness, conversion and *aggiornamento* required that the Church, its Magisterium, changed from being only a *teaching* church, to become a *learning* church as well. If this was done in a proper way, the Church would lose in power, but gain in authority. Was it prepared for this or was the whole project doomed to failure?

A change in the Church’s self-understanding had been going on during at least three to four decades before the announcement of the Council. But this was not without fierce resistance from the Roman hierarchy and many of the most known theologians, priests and even bishops of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had suffered

under the punitive hands of the *Sanctum Officium* and the Popes before 1958 when John XXIII was elected. Obviously, hardly anyone had ever thought of an Ecumenical Council. Quite a few were of the opinion that another Council would never be needed since the promulgation of the dogma of infallibility at the First Vatican Council in 1869 - 70. The power to make definitive decisions in questions of faith, moral and order was from that date in the hands of the popes. At the same time, we know that the First Vatican Council had had to close without having finished its work, so there had been mentions both by Pius XI and Pius XII to organise a proper closure of it. Fortunately, these ideas had not been developed! But we must underline the fact that the theologians who laid the foundations for the theology that would be the underpinning of the whole work of the Second Vatican Council never had the Council as a goal for their work. We shall soon return to the undeniable significance of this theology.

The preparatory work between 1959 and 1962 is characterised by hesitation, a non-committal attitude, not to say by some fear. Most people in and around the Curia in Rome seemed to follow Cardinal Ottaviani's motto "*Semper Idem*", "Always the same". The official Roman newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* and the Jesuit paper *La Civiltà Cattolica* had both met the announcement of the Council with complete silence, except for printing the very short press-release by the Secretariat of State. Some commentaries were published in *La Civiltà Cattolica* in April of 1959, but a thorough article did not appear during the whole of that year. The Pope was completely isolated after the 25<sup>th</sup> of January! In the civil media, on the other hand, this announcement was met with great expectations and interest. The internationally known Mayor of Florence, Giorgio La Pira (1904 – 1977), called it an event "of immense supernatural and historical significance", saying that "the Council itself is the essential 'political' event upon which depend peace among peoples and their future political, social, cultural and religious organisation."<sup>1</sup> La Pira would prove quite right on this more political issue of peace as we shall see later on.

There was a clear struggle of power between the dicasteries and different preparatory commissions regarding who would actually have the final decision in writing the documents for discussion. John XXIII had taken his precautions to defend the ecumenical issues by instituting the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and putting Cardinal Augustin Bea at its head. But he still had to play it by diplomacy as he could not be sure which way all the Bishops of the Church would take. When the preparatory documents were presented a last time before the Council would start, it is said that John XXIII took out a ruler and measured the text concluding: "Seven centimetres of condemnations and only

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<sup>1</sup> Alberigo, Giuseppe, *A Brief History of Vatican II*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2006; p 7

one centimetre of praise, is that the way we are going to address the world today?”

This is a big contrast to the inaugural speech with which John XXIII opened the Council on the 11<sup>th</sup> of October 1962. “*Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*”, “May the Mother Church rejoice ...”. He wanted the Council to be a celebration of conversion and joy, a pastoral Council where the Church would speak to and with the world, and not only to itself. We must be aware of the fact that with John XXIII we are passing from a very triumphalistic to a humble church and that not everybody wanted to see this transformation. This is also something we detect in the respective personalities of the two popes Pius XII and John XXIII. Pius XII, a specialist in canon law, born a Roman, thin and a prince of the church in his appearance, and difficult to approach, had led the Church, or at least the Roman part of it, into an ivory tower. John XXIII, a son of a farmer from northern Italy, a historian, jovial and round, pastoral and easy to get in touch with, stepped down from his throne and made the Church into a popular place. But despite a rigid and defect neo-scholastic theology, the persecution of outstanding theologians, the climate of suspicion a bit everywhere, the Church was still a growing body with its missions all over the world and it also had a political influence at least in predominantly Catholic European countries, especially after the Second World War. So why was a Council needed? The tensions within the Church came to the fore with the announcement of the Council and not everybody was prepared for this battle of evangelical credibility.

### **How did the Council look like?**

Not all of the Catholic Church’s Bishops were able to make it to the Council’s opening in October 1962. Some did not obtain permits of travel by their civil governments, mainly from China, North Korea and North Vietnam, and some were too old or ill to travel. Roughly 2.400 Council Fathers were gathered all along the Council’s four sessions of whom some died and some new were appointed. 64% of the Bishops came from non-European countries and for the first time in history it was possible to actually *see* the international character of the Church. The Vatican became a melting pot of a variety of cultures, languages, philosophies, theologies and liturgical rites. The catholicity of the Church became real and visible.

Each Bishop had the right to bring a theological expert with him, a so called *peritus*. As this was quite costly, many Bishops shared one expert. There were about 480 *periti* and some of them were present during all the sessions. They did not have the right to vote or speak but at least some of them played a crucial role

both when it came to write the documents and to help the Bishops with their statements during the plenary sessions. In the beginning, especially during the preparatory phase, they were quite suspicious of the Council as they often saw themselves as a kind of hostage of the Magisterium.

Many of the theologians who had been silenced, dismissed from their teaching positions and sometimes even exiled during the decades before the Council now turned up as famous *periti* of the Council. The theological style that had the greatest influence on the Council was the one called “Ressourcement”, representing those who went to the sources of the Christian faith to create a “new” theology. They were studying the Bible in a scientific way, especially the Biblical languages, they unearthed the earliest liturgical traditions, translated and introduced the Church Fathers in modern languages and they studied the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas at its source. This gave birth to a living theology, often a poetic one in its literary style, built on the Gospel message and not on apologetics. It was a presentation of a living faith and not a defence of a doctrinal system. Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, Marie-Dominique Chenu and Yves Congar are among the front figures in this kind of theology. Other famous names, not belonging directly to the “Ressourcement”, but still very creative in their own right, are Karl Rahner, Hans Küng and Joseph Ratzinger.

Then there were the observers from other Christian denominations, auditors and guests. The number of ecumenical observers varied from fifty to one hundred and this was also one of Pope John XXIII’s personal ideas for the Council. One of the most famous observers was Brother Roger from the ecumenical community of Taizé who was also one of the first persons to be received in a private audience by John XXIII after his installation as a pope. The community of Taizé also hired a flat in Rome during the Council and it quickly became one of the most popular meeting-points of bishops and journalists.

One group was completely omitted from the Council, the women. It wasn’t until the third session, in the autumn of 1964, that fifteen women were invited as auditors. Many of the Council Fathers were against this initiative and the Pope Paul VI had to personally intervene to get it through!

The four sessions of the Council, each one lasting for about ten weeks, had its specific character. The first one is characterized by the Bishops finding out about their real and original identity and thereby their emancipation from the government of the Roman Curia. This session, only a week after the opening of the Council, is also subject to the threat of the breaking out of a third world war with the Cuban missile crisis. There is also a crucial tension between the Communist East and the Liberal West with the one year old Berlin Wall. This is

the background for the continuously repeated key word “the unity of humankind”, sometimes expressed as “unity in diversity”.

In 1963, the Fathers became conscious of the wide scope of the Council, what they actually could achieve. The session in 1964 is dominated by the debates and writing of the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, that confirms the transformed self-understanding of the Church. The last session in 1965 is a confirmation of the fact that the Church had become an active dialogue partner with a diverse humanity. The “inter-sessions” comprised the nine months in-between the sessions and were the most intensive in respect to preparatory work.

Pope John XXIII died in June 1963 after a long illness. People feared that this was the end of this promising reform of the Church. Everybody was relieved when Cardinal Montini was elected and became Paul VI. In fact, he introduced “dialogue” as a new key concept and took the proceedings of the Council even further.

There is no doubt that the Second Vatican Council was a big event for the mass media. The news features from the Council were spectacular when it came both to colour, form and contents! The worldwide popularity of John XXIII also contributed to this fact. The plenary debates, the so called general congregations, were in theory behind closed doors and the Fathers were sworn to secrecy, but the controversies leaked happily around, which was gold for the journalists! Few thought that the Bishops could disagree on highly central subjects to the Church and so people were rejoicing over the fact that there was a real *aggiornamento* going on. The mass-media coverage also meant that the decisions, statements and texts became known all over the world at the same time. This also helped to quickly implement the Council on the local level.

Quite a number of people were also faithful in keeping diaries, journalists, experts and Bishops. Some have become very know. Gunnel Vallquist wrote regular columns on the Council for the Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* and they have been edited as a book.<sup>2</sup> The Dominican Yves Congar, one of the most famous *periti*, kept a rather fierce diary, describing all and everybody and not always in the most favourable light. This diary has been published in two volumes, *Mon Journal du Concile*.<sup>3</sup> One of the most famous columnists was Francis Xavier Murphy who wrote under pseudonym, Xavier Rynne, for *The New Yorker*. He was a Redemptorist Father and worked as a teacher in Rome during the Council. His columns have also been put together and published as a

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<sup>2</sup> Vallquist, Gunnel, *Dagbok från Rom, Andra Vatikankonciliet – en kamp om förnyelse*, Artos, 1999

<sup>3</sup> Congar, Yves, *Mon Journal du Concile, I et II*, Cerf, Paris, 2002

book, *Vatican Council II*<sup>4</sup> and is one of the most entertaining memoirs of the Council.

Unfortunately, time does not allow me to go into several of the interesting details of the Council here. Instead we have to take a look at what kind of transformation the Council brought about. This will also only be a taster as it is impossible to cover all the topics of the Council, still less entering into the very complex reception process and the challenges we are living with today. Let me draw some quick brushstrokes to give you a hint of the complexity.

### **Key subjects of the Council**

The very first subject to be treated was the liturgical reform that had been prepared and waited upon for quite a long time, already before the Council. The Constitution on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, was also the first document to be voted by the Fathers, during the second session in 1963. Already before the Council, the preparatory commission on the liturgy had been the most dynamic one and comprised some of the most distinguished theologians in Europe, like Dom Bernard Botte, a Benedictin monk from the University of Leuven, Aimé Georges Martimort from Toulouse, the Austrian and Jesuit Joseph Andreas Jungmann and the Dominican Pierre-Marie Gy from Institut Catholique in Paris. They were part of a liturgical movement that had been criticising the passivity of lay people in the celebration of the Eucharist for decades. One of the first measures to respond to this was to introduce the use of the vernacular in the celebration of mass. But this was just one concrete step towards a new life-style of the Church. Going through this document today we notice that it carries the whole spirit and ethos of the Council already at this early stage.

Let us just read through the very first lines of the first paragraph of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and continue from there. “The sacred council has set out to impart an ever-increasing vigor to the Christian lives of the faithful; to adapt more closely to the needs of our age those institutions which are subject to change; to encourage whatever can promote the union of all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever serves to call all of humanity into the church’s fold. Accordingly it sees particular cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy.”

The very focus of the text is the faithful, the ordinary people making up the Church. This is an expression of the pastoral intention of the Council and even if

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<sup>4</sup> Rynne, Xavier, *Vatican Council II*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1999, 2002

we consider that to be something natural today, the Councils up until then had never addressed the faithful, but only the Bishops and the clergy. The Councils had been legal matters, formulating laws, regulations and not least condemnations, never paying any attention to the lay people. Then we have the adaptation of the institutions of the Church, the *aggiornamento*, in order to respond to the needs of the faithful. That which can be adapted are things “subject to change”, so not everything can be up-dated. The Council never says anything of the demarcation lines here and one of the underlying issues of the Council is what is called “development of doctrine”. Doctrine has to be developed if it is to continue to give meaning, to be of the same meaning as it once had, as Cardinal John Henry Newman so succinctly has expounded. Then the goal of unity among the Christians is emphasised, ultimately the unity of the whole humankind. All this is the reason and basis for a reform of the liturgy and so the foundation for that which will be developed in the Constitution.

The liturgical reform made the faithful to adults in the life of the Church. It also led to a new and equal relationship between the clergy and the lay people. The liturgy was something you celebrated together, not something the priest did for the benefit of the people or in place of them. They were both equally important and private masses were to be avoided. It was also within the liturgy that a rich variety of cultural expressions was realised. That the contents of faith also would develop from this liturgical reform is quite normal according to the classical statement *lex orandi, lex credendi*, the way we pray, so we believe.

Many have said that the Second Vatican Council was the Council of the Bishops and the Lay People. This is true, as both these groups make the Church visible in its fullness in the local Church. The lay faithful became adults in the Church, equal partners, and this was expressed in emphasising the universal priesthood of the faithful, in the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. In one way, this goes hand in hand with the “Collegiality” of the Bishops. They are the successors of the Apostles, pastors, teachers and leaders in their own right and of their respective local Church. The legitimisation of these roles of the Bishop lies in the communion he has with all other Bishops and local Churches and with the Bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter. The Bishop of Rome, according to the tradition, is the Primate of the universal church, but he is Primate only because he is the Bishop of Rome. But there is also a tension here, which is far from solved, as the Council corroborated the dogma of infallibility from the First Vatican Council. Today, many Bishops are complaining that there are no real instances where the collegiality can be lived out and where they can have a real influence on the life of the Church as a whole. In addition to this, there are more and more interventions from the Roman Curia in the local dioceses or regional Bishops’ Conferences.

Even if there are tensions and problems in relation to the roles of the lay faithful and the Bishops, there is no way back to a pyramidal structure of the Church. People have simply learnt to interpret their faith in a grown-up way since the Council. The reason for this spells out the Holy Spirit! If there is one specific feature of the Second Vatican Council and its documents it is the presence of the Spirit. In *Lumen Gentium* it says that “The whole body of the faithful who have received an anointing which comes from the holy one (see 1Jn 2:20 and 27) cannot be mistaken in belief. It shows this characteristic through the entire people’s supernatural sense of the faith, when ‘from the bishops to the last of the faithful’, it manifests a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals.”<sup>5</sup> This is what we usually call the *sensus fidelium*, the consensus of the faithful. Obviously, we enter here into the very sensitive demarcation line between the primacy of interpretation, belonging to the Magisterium, and the right of interpretation, belonging to every faithful person who is reflecting over his or her faith, in the process of giving meaning to his or her life. Rightly, the academic theologians are asking where they come into this today and how free they actually are in formulating a development of doctrine.

Paragraph four of *Lumen Gentium* is a hymn of praise to the Holy Spirit, saying among other things: “The Spirit dwells in the church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple (see 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19), prays and bears witness in them that they are his adopted children (see Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15-16 and 26). He guides the church in the way of all truth (see Jn 16:13) and, uniting it in fellowship and ministry, bestows upon it different hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and in this way directs it and adorns it with his fruits (see Eph 4:11-12; 1 Cor 12:4; Gal 5:22). By the power of the Gospel he rejuvenates the church, constantly renewing it and leading it to perfect union with its spouse.” Nobody else than the holy Spirit can be the ultimate leader of the Church. If nothing else, this should summon us all to humility.

The liturgy, the interpretation of the faith, the life and order of the Church, everything strives for the unity of humankind, universal peace and ultimately for the salvation of all of humanity. The Council emphasises time and again that the Christian faith cannot be disconnected from the secular world, it has to be lived out in its absolute centre. The Christian faith is not a refuge from reality, but must be in solidarity with everything human. This is clearly spelled out in the first paragraph of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*: “The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community of people united in Christ and

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<sup>5</sup> § 12

guided by the holy Spirit in their pilgrimage towards the Father's kingdom, bearers of a message of salvation for all of humanity. That is why they cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.”

Finally, which of the documents of the Council has had the biggest impact on theological research and church life world-wide? The four Constitutions on the Church, the Liturgy, the Revelation and the Church in the Modern World have brought about a fundamental transformation of the Church's life-style as such. But having concluded that, there is no real contender to the shortest document of them all, *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions. It gave birth to an inter-faith dialogue which has spread to other Christian denominations, to all universities, to theologians as well as politicians, decision-makers and ordinary people. It has simply become a reality which probably is influencing our faith more than anything else today.

Once again, we recognise the emphasis on the unity of humankind, but now it is expounded in relation to other faith traditions. “Humanity forms but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth (see Acts 17:26), and also because all share a common destiny, namely God. His providence, evident goodness, and saving designs extend to all humankind (see Wis 8:1; Acts 14:17; Rom 2:6-7; 1 Tim 2:4) against the day when the elect are gathered together in the holy city which is illuminated by the glory of God, and in whose splendour all peoples will walk (see Apoc 21:23ff.).”<sup>6</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Second Vatican Council is an event in the sense that it is rooted in the whole history of the Christian faith and still has to be implemented, to be lived. There are many unresolved questions and we do have different opinions on how to solve them, if we ever will! The important thing is not to exclude people on the way but trying our best to respect the ethos of the Council. We are grown up people, we all have our special gifts which we are bound to share with one another, we are guided by the holy Spirit and so we are invited to a continuous dialogue. Dialogue means “through the word, by the word”. God is a dialogical being, revealing the divine through the Word. We can only grasp this Word together, in the unity of a multi-faceted humanity.

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<sup>6</sup> § 1