

Vatican II between Catholicism and Catholicity

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I Vatican II: between Catholicism and catholicity

Catholicity has always been, and remains, the challenge which Vatican II poses for Roman Catholicism. The challenge of catholicity also concerns Protestant churches of all persuasions and the Orthodox communion.

Although I am a Protestant theologian, this article is more than a comment from outside Catholicism. *'Nostra res agitur'*, said Willem Visser't Hooft, the Secretary General of the World Council of Churches, when John XXIII announced the Second Vatican Council – 'It concerns us too', which means the Protestant churches, including the Anglican communion, and the Orthodox churches. This article is essentially restricted to Roman Catholicism, and to the challenge which Vatican II represents for it, but to some extent, it also concerns the main families of Protestant churches and Orthodoxy. Indeed, in the other Christian churches, especially in the various Protestant churches, there are all kinds of connections with what I have to say here about Roman Catholicism and catholicity. But these points will be not so much explicit as implicit, since they are not the direct object of these remarks of a Protestant theologian on Vatican II.

The significance and legitimacy of this approach are related to the unity of Christ's Church. The source of these comments and thus their criterion, is the Church of Christ and more precisely Christ himself. They all refer to him and to one another, because each of them in its specificity, and in spite of all due ambiguity, possesses something of the Church of Christ. Mutually critical dialogue nourished by the relation to Christ is part of their very nature. It is a requirement of truth, because it is fraternal, and a requirement of fraternity, because it is true. Any spirit of superiority and thus of arrogance in any Christian body with regard to any other is as uncharacteristic as mutual indifference. John XXIII invited observers from

non-Roman churches to the Council. Dialogue presupposes and implies a reciprocal participation which, when successful, is a mark of the Church of Christ at the heart of human society taking effect in and between churches. The following has two main aspects: the innovatory nature of Vatican II and the challenge which it poses.¹

II The innovatory nature of Vatican II

An event like Vatican II calls for several approaches which are usually variants of two different though not mutually exclusive viewpoints, one historical and the other theological. Each of them tends to take priority at the expense of the other, or the two together try to dominate a field whose actual nature they ignore. This tendency to absolutization is a flight into history or into theology, or even into both simultaneously. It is an escape from reality. Both forms of flight were characteristic of whole areas of traditional Roman Catholicism before Vatican II. Admittedly traditional Roman Catholicism cannot be entirely reduced to these aspects; nevertheless, but its authentic spiritual reality can only benefit from an analysis of this kind.

Flight into history: that is: the history of the foundations of Christian faith and of the Christian Church, and of the Judaeo-Christian sacred Scriptures, and the history of the Councils and of characteristic aspects of the Church, but also the isolation and thus absolutization of this history in relation to general history.

Flight into theology: that is: the theological absolutization of history understood as above, and of Holy Scriptures, Councils, and characteristic aspects of the Church. Since history is conceived of essentially as referring to the past, this inclination tends towards fundamentalism (absolutization of the foundations of the Christian faith and Church, and of the Scriptures), and/or towards integrism (absolutization of this aspect of the history of the Church); in other words, towards restoration of the past, with ‘salvation lies in the past’ as the watchword. The past is considered to be supportive and a vital impetus in the present, and there is a tendency to adapt the past to the present, to develop the potential of the past, and to ‘actualize’ it: salvation is to be sought in the present efficacy of the past. A tendency to flight is also apparent in mystical theology, when it is diluted in a form of disembodied spiritualism, or is conceived of as a refuge from reality considered as the locus of evil.

III The threefold temptation of traditional Catholicism

Over the centuries, traditional Roman Catholicism has been subject to a threefold temptation:

1. the absolutized particularism of the idea it has of itself, considered as self-sufficient, either intensively or *ad intra* (in a communitarian sense), in either the extensive or the *ad extra* sense with a pretention to universalism, or both: it is theocratic in both forms;

2. the supranaturalism of its notion of God, who rules the world (and the Church) from without; here we might talk of the extrinsic nature of divine revelation and therefore of the exteriority of the transcendent compared with the immanent; then salvation (which was given in the past and is actualized in the present) originates in another world, a supranatural world (*supra naturam*);

3. the a-historicism of mystical theology as a theology of the experience of God, although that is considered to be located apart from and outside the world.

With reference to the temptations of Roman Catholicism, a temptation in the present context is a tendency to decline, and to go astray from reality. The threefold temptation of traditional Roman Catholicism, and therefore of a period before Vatican II, is certainly still a temptation for conciliar Catholicism, marked by Vatican II yet subsequent to it. Vatican II can be assessed either in terms of these temptations (and then it, or rather its innovatory aspect, is seen as a parenthesis in the history of Roman Catholicism, which is inevitably called on to repair the hiatus); or, on the contrary, in terms of its innovatory character (and therefore of the way in which it tends to move beyond the threefold temptation of the Roman Catholicism that preceded it). Vatican II makes Roman Catholicism confront the question of its possible renewal: the question is that of its catholicity. Vatican II is an issue for Catholicism, because catholicity is an issue for it.

IV An act of conversion to the God of reality

The question, or issue, has to do with the innovatory nature of Vatican II, which consists in the Council's critically positive acceptance of the challenge of reality. Vatican II defined a new approach for history and theology, which could not be reduced to the dominant attitudes of

traditional Catholicism. Vatican II emphasized not only the specific history of the faith tradition behind Catholicism but history in general, and simultaneously included (this, at least, was the intention) the other churches, other religions and all humankind in its field of vision. It no longer focused on a supranatural God proper to a 'religion of authority', but a God who is concerned with and linked to this world and humanity, and whose transcendence is thereby shown to be inherent in the immanent as a transcendence of immanence. It is neither merely a form of faith refuge, as in the fundamentalist and integrist tendency bent on restoration, nor simply a faith that actualizes and adapts the fundamental elements of the past, but a faith-source. It does indeed imply the fundamental data handed down from the past but also moves beyond them, since God is the living God. He is, as the Book of Revelation puts it, the one 'who is [that is, today, and on that basis we approach, recognize and bear witness to him as the one] who was and who is coming' (Rev. 1.4). The source is a source of inspiration and orientation, and the living basis for the renewal of life, for it offers us the possibility of living in a new way in and through the given conditions of life, and therefore of reality.

The new approach of Vatican II has to do with the essential correlation between the Church and churches, Christianity and other religions; between the particular and the universal; between God and the world; between transcendence and immanence; and between faith and reality. In this approach, there is no flight into an exclusivist particularism, a doctrinaire and dogmatic theology, or an isle of reclusion for the blessed, all three being versions of a fundamental dualism. Vatican II marked the Roman Church's recognition of reality and of the challenge which it represented for the Church, its self-understanding, and its understanding of God and of faith. At Vatican II, the Catholicism of the second half of the twentieth century reached humanity as it had come to be, aware of the end of its multiseular pretence of constructing another world alongside the real world or in order to master the real world. Vatican II was an act of humanity on the part of the Roman Catholic Church, a new understanding of the real world as a reality inhabited, in spite of all its ambiguity, by God, and an act of conversion to the God of reality.

V The challenge of Vatican II

The innovatory aspect of Vatican II was also its challenge, which was to

reconcile Roman Catholicism with catholicity, and catholicity with Roman Catholicism. Vatican II wished to be a Council not of excommunication but of union and communion; not of delimitation but of integration.

Traditional Roman Catholicism, characterized as absolutized particularism, is a Church of delimitation and therefore of exclusion. The delimitation in question is directed outwards, to external reality: this is an inimical confrontation between two regimes, the spiritual and the temporal, although the latter claims to be independent of the former. The history of this confrontation is a long one. It ranges from the medieval investitures dispute to what has been called the Modernist crisis, which, generally speaking, is the conflict between the Roman Catholic Church and the modern world. When confronted by the real external world (external because it refuses to be integrated by the Church), the Church delimited itself as a church in relation to what it is not. This delimitation also took place with regard to what lay and took place within the Church itself. This Church was actually dispersed between East and West and their respective attitudes, one characterized by a predominantly Platonist and thus contemplative Greek philosophy, the other by the Roman and therefore legalistic spirit of organization, yet it had resolutely maintained a fundamental unity throughout the centuries, that is, in its faith, though this was formal, apparent and already suffering from the strain of divisive unrest associated with differences of culture and thus of nations and history, which were distinctive features. Eventually this conflict of specific traits led to a great rupture in the Great Schism of 1054 between East and West. It was followed in the sixteenth century, at the time of the Protestant Reformation, with a schism within Western Christianity. A series of other (quantitatively less emphatic) schisms between the two dominant aspects produced (at the cost of excommunications), or suffered, by the Roman Catholic Church would continue to mark the period beyond the sixteenth century, although the Protestant churches could scarcely be said to have been outclassed in this respect. The adage '*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*' (no salvation outside the Church), though actually inimical to the pretensions of the Roman Catholic Church to spiritual hegemony over the temporal, was directed against the temporal and against the churches cut off from Rome. In fact, the theology of delimitation, with its associated exclusivism, is an ideology justifying the Roman Catholic Church's inability to be the Church in itself alone and, as such, the equal counterpart of the surrounding society and culture. The pretended power and authority advanced by that

theology, and the resulting negation of catholicity, serve to compensate for this impotence.

Vatican II started from that point, from the break between the Roman Catholic Church and wider human society, and from the division between the churches, in awareness of the collapse of the walls that had been under way for so long already. Vatican II was produced by the shaking walls of Roman Catholic particularism. The Council was faced by the challenge of having to scrutinize traditional Roman Catholicism to discover the elements that still maintained, and perhaps always would maintain, Christ's authentic Church, God's true revelation and true faith, and of having to separate them from the rest at the great risk of throwing the baby out with the bath water, which might prove to be a remedy worse than the evil to be cured. The challenge of Vatican II was to discern the very heart of authentic Christianity in Roman Catholicism, which had to be cleansed of all kinds of waste matter while confirming its truth and therefore its catholicity, without which it could not be reconciled with the surrounding society and culture or with the other churches.

VI The beginning of an era of perception of reality

How are we to overcome the exclusivist theology of the delimitation, and therefore of the construction and maintenance of dividing walls, without denying the principle of exclusion inherent in the Christian Church, the revelation of God, and faith? In fact Christianity introduces a difference, which it must respect or deny itself: it is not a form of inclusivism, which is conformism. But that does not make it exclusivist, for the principle of exclusion inherent in Christianity is dialectically linked to the principle of inclusion: exclusion serves inclusion. It is not absolute in the sense of the absolutism characteristic of exclusivism, which fixes the differences, exacerbates them and sets the salient parts against each other, but it relates to the inclusion of what is different inasmuch as it forms part of reality. The relativity of the principle of exclusion is not relativism; the principle of exclusion is a critical principle and therefore a principle of discernment with regard to reality.

A flight from reality, then, is characteristic of a number of the dominant aspects of traditional Roman Catholicism. This flight is a repression, and the repressed content, at the cost of a dualism reinforced by an ideology, is held in a world apart. This is discredited on the basis of ideological

prejudice. Reality is subject to discrimination on the basis of dualism. The difference between this and discernment is that discrimination relies on a deflection of perception from reality as such, whereas discernment (and St Paul talks of the discernment of spirits) depends on the contemplation of reality by attention to reality and to the question addressed to reality: what is constructive and what is destructive in reality? What is constructive of life, of self, of relations to others and to the environment, and of a relationship to God, or destructive of all that? In the sense of evaluation, discernment judges so to speak on evidence, whereas discrimination prejudges, since it is a flight from reality. Discrimination is as it were the expression of a superego which obscures reality as it is; it considers reality to be subject to a law other than the actual law of reality (when we speak of the heteronomy of reality). It makes human beings themselves heteronomous, separating them from their autonomy, their own law, and their own judgement (discernment) of reality in their own reality. Discrimination replaces discernment with prejudice, whereas discernment discards discrimination on the basis of its freedom to contemplate reality and to evaluate it on evidence.

The challenge of Vatican II is to end an era of discrimination and to begin an era of discernment, of discernment of reality, out of awareness that God is the God of reality and faith, of faith in reality. For Roman Catholicism, this is tantamount to being summoned to undergo a kind of psychoanalysis in order to nominate and confront reality as that in and with and through which God meets us. Reality is the sign and instrument of God for the advent of faith and of the Church, which call for a correlation between reality and the Gospel, and more exactly the acknowledgement of the essential correlation between reality and the Gospel, and therefore discernment of this correlation. The Christian faith and Church call for awareness of this correlation, and are specifically and simultaneously the sign of its effectiveness and the instrument of its execution.

VII The integration of reality and recapitulation of everything in Christ

The ultimate challenge of Vatican II is the integration of reality. This is necessarily a critical integration, and an inclusion of reality at the cost of an exclusion. It cannot legitimately be a recovery of reality, which is a stranglehold on it and, as such, a resurgence of the Roman Catholic

temptation to absolutism. Ultimately, integration cannot be the sole possession of any particular church or faith, since reality is God's reality and God is its sole master, just as the Church and its faith exist by him and for him and their master is the very master of reality. The critical integration of reality must pertain to God himself. That is the 'recapitulation' or consummation which the author of Ephesians says is the mystery of God's 'purpose, the hidden plan he so kindly made in Christ from the beginning to act upon when the times had run their course to the end, that he would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth' (Eph. 1.9–10).² He states that the ultimate intention of God's creative and redemptive plan is, as the standard French text says, '*récapituler*': that is, literally, to give everything without exception a 'head' in Christ.³ This is no plain statement of fact, the mere utterance of something that happens to be so, and which just has to be accepted purely and simply as being so, but a militant affirmation, testifying to something that is to come about and is confirmed only by happening. It is something that happens in a specific way and is significant in and for faith and for the Church, and with them and also through them, though not restrictively. The confirmation is inclusive and universal, but as an affirmation of faith which demands faith to be 'intelligible' and consciously, inwardly verifiable. The faith in question is faith in Christ, or in the threefold God, and that is the God who recapitulates, consummates, and brings everything together under Christ, as head.

This recapitulation consists in an assessment of reality, distinguishing in reality what is destructive and thus mortal from what is constructive and life-affirming: this assessment contains an exclusion and an inclusion, and turns what is excluded into matter for metamorphosis, a transformation, precisely by seeing it in the light of God the creator and redeemer, who always creates on the basis of nothing as such. Recapitulation also consists, through this dual, exclusive and inclusive, judgement, in the accomplishment of reality as reality in God, in the God who is the foundation of reality and also its end and goal. Faith and the Church can only draw from this recapitulation as from a vital spring and bear witness to it as the living source of reality as such. They do not have to, indeed cannot, carry out the recapitulation, but can signify it, fallibly as must be the case, but also trusting surely in the power of its advent, which will be stronger than themselves and their fallibility, and stronger too than the destructive aspect of reality.

Therefore Vatican II offers a threefold challenge as a Council of reconciliation, on behalf of an affirmation of faith in the invigorating power of Christ and therefore of faith in the consummation of everything in Christ. It calls for traditional Roman Catholicism to be removed from the impasse of an exclusivist and discriminatory theology; in other words, from delimitation. It calls for Roman Catholicism to be reconnected with reality as a whole by restoring the actual status of Catholicism and reality, which is for the truth of both to be manifested only through their relation or reference to Christ, or to God who recapitulates all things in Christ. It calls for Roman Catholicism, for its own sake and for that of reality as a whole, to be helped to open itself up to the process of consummation in Christ, and therefore to open up to the spiritual in order to discern the destructive–daemonic aspect in reality (including faith and Church), and to distinguish the constructive, angelic aspect from the daemonic.

There is yet another challenge to face: that of assisting the metamorphosis or transformation of the destructive void into constructive material, by highlighting the creative and redemptive power of God who accomplishes all things, ‘who makes the dead live, and calls into being things that are not’ (Rom. 4.17). When applied to the Roman Catholic Church, this means: assisting the passage through death of that which is fossilized and petrified, congealing and stupefying, so that it is transformed into vital energy and thus resurrected. This is the rebirth of the Roman Catholic Church, the work of Christ himself who remakes all things, transposing the Church from its former to its new state, and summoning the Church to follow the course of metamorphosis with deep confidence in Christ and in a state of profound love of human beings and of all reality, with courage, determination and patience.

The final challenge also implies the need to abandon the destructive forms of determinism which resist the process of consummation. There are diseases of faith linked to the abovementioned inimical temptations that lie unnoticed in near-obscure. These sicknesses have to be diagnosed and identified before they can be treated, nursed and cured by the process of bringing to unity. In certain cases, sickness seems to masquerade as normality, which is a symptom of sectarian decline (the absolutization of one or other or of all the temptations of Roman Catholicism, which I have already described). Then, when all forms of treatment seem to fail, it is supremely tempting to attempt radical surgery and therefore excommunication. But it is prudent, and essential, to remember the lesson that

multisecularism, and to date delimitation and therefore exclusion in that sense, is almost always counter-productive. This practice has surely always reduced the catholicity of the Roman Catholic Church, committing it to expend its energy in a contrary rather than a supportive campaign – supportive, that is, of Christ by whom all things are made new. Bringing to a head, and therefore judgement (exclusion and inclusion, inclusion at the cost of an exclusion) form part of this consummation in Christ. The correct reaction to the challenge in question is to invest in the health of faith and of the Church, by discerning in the decline (the sickness) in question the proportion of truth to be included, and by thus eroding from within the proportion of error that must be excluded. Either sickness is embraced and the old leaven remains, or it is purged out to make way for the new.

VIII Conclusion

Vatican II was the Roman Catholic Church's encounter with reality and with catholicity, the one inseparably implying the other. There is little point in asking whether this encounter was a success or a failure, and to what extent in either case. We too often look to the past, when there is a great risk of resorting to flight. The Church (which means the Roman Catholic Church like any other) has other, new encounters to experience with history and with God as the God of and in history. Reference to Vatican II is useful if it helps us to face these new encounters, but of little value if it deflects us from them. The new encounters apply to all the churches, and concern them all. The churches' only hope is to face them together in a truly conciliar effort. The appointment is always with reality and with catholicity. It always poses the question of the theology of delimitation *versus* the theology of recapitulation. It always poses the question of aptness to learn from the Creator Spirit.

This might be a petition to a future catholic pope,⁴ upholding and upheld by the vital forces established in the Gospel of Christ (and therefore critically correlated with reality) and put to the test of one catholic faith and Church.

Amen: Veni Creator Spiritus. Come Holy Spirit, our souls inspire.

Translated by J. G. Cumming

Notes

1. The continuation of this article will be published later (*L'échéance–et le kairos–de Vatican II* and *La catholicité de Vatican II*). For date and place see the site <http://www.premiumorange.com/theologie.protestante/gerardsiegwalt/pages/chrono.html>.
2. Jerusalem Bible [Tr.].
3. Literally, to 'recapitulate everything in Christ' ('*anakephalaiomai*', Greek NT; '*instaurare omnia in Christo, quae in caelis, et quae in terra sunt, in ipso*', Vulgate; 'to bring everything to a unity in Christ', REB; 'to gather up all things in him', NRSV; 'all human history shall be consummated in Christ', Phillips; 'to bring everything together under Christ, as head', Jerusalem) [Tr.].
4. In Rome and elsewhere, since the seat of the apostles Peter and Paul (not to mention John and others) is where the spirit of Peter and Paul is to be found.