

Australian Hierarchy at Vatican II

(written in 2007 by Thang Vu during his seminary formation towards the priesthood)

Part II: A study of the speeches and writings of John XXIII concerning the Second Vatican Council, with special reference to his perception of an epochal shift and his vision for the Church into the future.

Trembling a little with emotion, but with humble firmness of purpose, We now tell you of a two [*three*] fold celebration: We propose to call a diocesan synod for Rome, and an ecumenical council for the Universal Church...[and] a desired and long awaited modernization of the Code of Canon Law.¹

With these words, on January 25, 1959, less than 90 days after his election as the successor to Pius XII, Pope John XXIII announced his decision to convene a new council during a speech to a small group of cardinals gathered in the Roman basilica of St. Paul's outside the Walls for the concluding liturgy of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.² Pope John was a diplomat, a pastor, but also and more profoundly, a historian. He was able to relativize so many "traditions" that submerged "*the* Tradition" to which he wanted the Church to be faithful. He knew the relativity of certain theological perspectives and ecclesial practices which had taken on a kind of permanence and understood how to return to the great constants which the life of the Church discovers in mediating on the Gospel. These included ongoing reform, the meeting of Councils and its consequent implementation, the role of the Pope which did not contradict that of the bishops, and the importance of Scripture and of patristic history, including that of the East.³

¹ X Francis; Cronin Murphy, F John & Smith, Ferrer, *The Encyclicals and Other Messages of John XXIII* (Washington DC: TPS Press, 1964), 22.

² Giuseppe Alberigo, *History of Vatican II. Vol 1 - Announcing and Preparing Vatican Council II: Towards a New Era in Catholicism*, ed. Giuseppe & Joseph Komonchak Alberigo (Maryknoll: Orbis Book, 1995), 3. From now on Alberigo, *HVII*.

³ Guy Bedouelle, *The History of the Church* (London: Continuum, 2003), 157.

However, there were some episodes which demonstrated how the Roman Curia, or at least some of it, was unaware of this news. For instance, the day after the official announcement, one who was a consultant to the Holy Office and worked rather frequently at the Curia, went over to that congregation. That evening when he returned he was utterly amazed and excited, saying that everyone at the congregation was agitated and could not understand how a Pope could suddenly announce a council without first consulting the appropriate sections of the Curia and preparing for what was not at all an easy task. The moral of the story is that when Pope John announced Vatican Council II, not even the congregation of the Curia was aware of what was happening. In addition, *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican's semi-official newspaper, published only the press release from the Secretariat of State, and *La Civiltà Cattolica* - the Jesuits' authoritative biweekly magazine - completely ignored the announcement during the first quarter of 1959, apart from reproducing that same meager press release in its news summary. It was only at the end of April 1959 that Pope John formulated the fundamental aim of the Council: to increase Christians' commitment to their faith, "to make more room for charity . . . with clarity of thought and greatness of heart."⁴ Having established that, he did not hesitate to characterize the upcoming Council in absolutely traditional terms. That is, it would be a free and responsible council of bishops, and thus it would be able to conduct effective deliberation - but it would do so with the *sui generis* participation of representatives from the non-Catholic Christian Churches.⁵

In the opening speech on 11 October 1962, John XXIII wanted the Church "up to date [*aggiornamento*] where required, and by the wise organization of mutual cooperation."⁶ In addition, he pastorally stressed that:

The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary, everything being measured in the forms and proportions of a magisterium which is predominantly pastoral in character.⁷

⁴ Giuseppe Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II*, trans. Matthew Sherry (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), 8.

⁵ Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II*, 8-9.

⁶ W Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II: Introductions and Commentaries by Catholic Bishops and Experts, Responses by Protestants & Orthodox Scholars*, ed. W Abbott (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), 712.

⁷ Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, 715.

The above translation was based on Abbott's version which is perhaps the closest to the original version. Yet when the Latin version of the inaugural speech appeared in *Acta Acpostolicae Sedis*, the official collection of papal documents, the text had been tampered with and censored. The ideal of the substance of faith disappeared, and cautious qualifications were introduced. They are italicized as Hebblethwaite noticed:

For the...deposit of faith itself, or the truths which are contained in our venerable doctrine, is one thing, and the way in which they are expressed is another, retaining however the same sense and meaning.⁸

The last clause, not by chance, came from the anti-modernist oath of 1910 which also spoke of holding fast to *the absolute and immutable truth*.⁹ This incident indicated that John XXIII did not have his way all worked out smoothly. Furthermore it demonstrates to us the value of cross-referencing sources to highlight discrepancies, themselves making their own historical point.

According to Vodola¹⁰ the concept of *aggiornamento* has firm pastoral and intellectual foundations in the tradition of the Church and was incredibly formative in the life of Pope John himself. However, was the announcement of the Council “completely unexpected, like a flash of heavenly light, shedding sweetness in eyes and hearts”?¹¹ Certainly not. Vodola helpfully suggests that the Catholic Church had begun a very slow and subtle process of *aggiornamento* or epochal shift, particularly in the areas of liturgy, biblical scholarship and the lay apostolate, long before John XXIII called the Council.¹² The present controversies about the Council are fundamentally about John XXIII and the politics of change, its necessity, implementation and most importantly, the way change should be interpreted in the history of the Church. The pontificate of Pius X (1903-14) represented a fight against many changes that he considered to be ills besetting the Church, especially Modernism. However he was best and somewhat fondly remembered for lowering the age for First Communion and

⁸ Peter Hebblethwaite, *John XXIII: Pope of the Council* (London: HarperCollins, 1984), 432.

⁹ Hebblethwaite, *Pope of the Council*, 432.

¹⁰ Max Vodola, *The Council in History: John XXIII & Vatican II – Lecture I* (Melbourne: CTC, 2007).

¹¹ Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, 712.

¹² Vodola, *The Council in History: John XXIII & Vatican II – Lecture I*.

encouraging regular communion by the faithful. According to Chadwick, this perhaps, amounted to an epochal shift in the liturgical practice of worship:

Historians, in hindsight, if asked which act of which Pope did most to affect the Church since 1800, would put their finger on this change of 1905-6, the encouragement of frequent, even daily communion, and the receiving of it by children.¹³

The pontificate of Pius XI (1922-39) was marked, encouragingly, with the expansion of Catholic Action which involved the participation of the laity in the mission of the Church. This development was the cornerstone of what Vatican II came to articulate as the unique and indispensable place of the laity in the life of the Church, the universal priesthood of all believers and the universal call to a life of holiness in the world. In Australia, Catholic Action began tentatively in 1931 with the formation of the Campion Society at Melbourne University. The suffering of the Depression sparked the beginnings of a new social and philosophical awareness among members of a small group of young Catholic intellectuals and university students. This group included men such as Denys Jackson, Frank Maher, Kevin Kelly and BA Santamaria. They established the highly successful Catholic Worker newspaper and were instrumental in the formation of the Australian National Secretariat of Catholic Action.¹⁴ The enhanced role of the laity continued to take shape during the long pontificate of Pius XII, who authorised a number of further significant developments in the life of the Church. These were relatively creative for their time and continued the process of epochal shift. *Mediator Dei* (1947) (On the Sacred Liturgy) addressed issues such as the vernacular in the liturgy and the active participation of the lay faithful.

Therefore, it is incorrect to say that John XXIII alone was responsible for the *aggiornamento* (a bringing up to date or epochal shift), which was so manifest in the Council. The *aggiornamento*, which was the Pope's great legacy to the Church, would have been inconceivable had the groundwork not been prepared by Pius XII with his liturgical and

¹³ Owen Chadwick, *A History of the Popes: 1830-1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), 362.

¹⁴ See Bruce Duncan, *Crusade or Conspiracy? Catholics and the Anti-Communist Struggle in Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2001).

pastoral reforms.¹⁵ John was always conscious of the efforts of his predecessors and he knew that the moment was coming for an ecumenical council in the Church, that it was the best way for bringing into sharp focus, and finding solutions for, the many new problems and needs which had been increasingly emerging.¹⁶ A chronology of the life of John XXIII (1881-1963) has shed some striking light on the Pope who summoned the Council:

Table I: A Brief Chronology of John XXIII

Date	Event	Comment(s)
25/11/1881	Born – Angelo Guiseppe Roncalli at Sotto il Monte, Italy, in the Diocese of Bergamo	His family worked as sharedcroppers
1901-1914	Seminarian at the Pontifical Roman Seminary.	Lectured in church history. Roncalli accompanied Tedeschi as he re-organised his diocese especially visiting the historical account of the pastoral visit of St. Charles Borromeo. Synod of Bergamo in 1910 brought local customs and laws into line with the needs of modern times and altered circumstances. ¹⁷
	Ordained priest in 1904	
	Secretary to Bishop of Bergamo – Tedeschi 1905-1914	
	1910 – Synod of Diocese	
1925-1953	Diplomat posts including Bulgaria, Turkey, Greek and France.	Gained pastoral insight from the Orthodox and Islam and French.
1953-1958	Patriarch of Venice	Gained more pastoral leadership
1958-1963	Elected Pope 28/10/1958	Took the name John XXIII
	Solemn Coronation 4/11/1958	Feast of St. Charles Borromeo – Reformer (coronation unusually held on a weekday to match this feast)

From the above brief chronology, the influence of Borromeo was clearly evident when Roncalli convoked the diocesan synod of Venice in 1957, following an extensive round of pastoral visitation throughout the diocese. It was a year before his election to the papacy. In his pastoral letter to the priests and people of Venice, he wrote:

You've probably heard the word *aggiornamento* repeated so many times. Well, Holy Church who is ever youthful wants to be in a position to understand the diverse

¹⁵ Murphy, *The Encyclicals and Other Messages of John XXIII*, 381.

¹⁶ Murphy, *The Encyclicals and Other Messages of John XXIII*, 381.

¹⁷ Angelo Roncalli, *My Bishop: A Portrait of Mgr Giacomo Maria Radini Tedeschi* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1969), 92.

circumstances of life so that she can adapt, correct, improve and be filled with fervour. That in brief is the nature of the Synod, and that is its goal.¹⁸

Furthermore, two very typically communicated signs of Pope John's thoughts on liturgical renewal were his public praise of the ancient Ambrosian rite on the feast-day of St Charles Borromeo in November 1962 and his decision to add St Joseph's name to the list of saints in the canon of the Mass in the same month.¹⁹ The former indicated his support for liturgical diversity, the latter symbolised to arch-conservatives that not even the Mass was immutable.²⁰

Overall, this part has indicated that the announcing of the Council was neither as completely unexpected in its origins nor as consistently farsighted in its provisions and an epochal shift.

John XXIII deeply reflected on the Council when approaching his death:

It is not that the gospel has changed; it is that we have begun to understand it better. Those who have lived as long as I have...were enabled to compare different cultures and traditions, and know that the moment has come to discern the signs of the times, to seize the opportunity and to look far ahead.²¹

¹⁸ Hebblethwaite, *Pope of the Council*, 264.

¹⁹ Murphy, *The Encyclicals and Other Messages of John XXIII*, 446.

²⁰ Murphy, *Australian Hierarchy and Vatican II*, 452.

²¹ Hebblethwaite, *Pope of the Council*, 295-6.

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