

Principal Themes of Vatican II

By Paul Panicia

If one could identify an over-arching theme or leitmotif of the Council then it would be a renewed understanding of the Church. The two significant dimensions to this ecclesial theme are understanding the Church in itself and the Church in relation to the world, including its relationship to other Christian traditions, other faiths and the secular world. This article attempts to show how the documents of the Council are grouped under four principal headings and it offers examples of how significant aspects of the Council, or themes, recur in the various documents. It is perhaps important to note that the popes themselves had introduced their own themes and influences.

Pope Pius XII

It would be a mistake - as has sometimes been suggested - to see the Second Vatican Council as a reaction against the 20 year pontificate of Pope John's immediate predecessor. Perhaps the pontificate was tired towards the end because Pope Pius tended to keep much within his own hands along with other idiosyncrasies. He was elected on the eve of World War II and was faced with the vast problems of that conflict. His reign carries certain shadows, but some of his reforms were clearly precursors of the Council. The Constitution on the Liturgy owes much to Pius' encyclical *Mediator Dei* and the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* gave scripture scholars the necessary freedom to use modern biblical exegetical methods and paved the way for the important - almost foundational - document on revelation *Dei Verbum*.

Pope St John XXIII

Pope John convoked the Council in 1959 and his speech included:

'This will be a demonstration of the Church.....'

The preparatory work for the Council began formally on 6 June 1960 when the Preparatory Commissions and Secretariats were established. The fact that the largely Curia-dominated Commissions prepared the initial *schemata* (discussion documents) was responsible for many difficulties at the beginning. The eventual development of the Council, of which Pope John clearly approved was due to the Council developing a mind of its own, as it were. Cardinals Suenens and Montini were primarily responsible for presenting a comprehensive plan to Pope John which he approved. The way that various interweaving themes ultimately permeated most of the documents was due, among other things to the Council's move away from predetermined concepts and categories in order to look at issues afresh, and frequently to return to sources. Pope John's vision for the Church has been much debated and written about, consequently a vast number of books about him and about the preparations for the Council are available. The Home Page and the section on [The Need for Vatican II](#) give brief extracts from Pope John's opening speech. While he had no detailed plan, what is clear - in briefest summary - is that *aggiornamento* and a striving for Christian Unity were foremost in his mind. Less sharply defined is the sense he gives of a striving to promote a better understanding of the community of the whole of humankind as being part of God's plan for the world: 'In the present development of human events, through which mankind appears to be entering a new order, one must, rather,

discern a hidden plan of Divine Providence.' (speech opening the Council 11 Oct 1962). As a footnote, as well as the usual translation of *aggiornamento*, a 'bringing-up-to-date', it has been said that when asked about the purpose of the proposed Council, he replied, 'to let some fresh air into the Church'. Pope John's achievement, after a great deal of uncertainty at the beginning was to launch the Council in a remarkably warm atmosphere and impress the world with his own humanity.

Pope St Paul VI

Giovanni Battista Cardinal Montini, Archbishop of Milan was elected Pope on 21 June 1963. Addressing the whole world, in effect, but speaking to the Cardinals assembled in the Sistine Chapel the following day, he pledged to continue the Council. He spoke in terms which indicated continuity with what had been developing under his predecessor. He spoke of peace in the world, perhaps building on John's great encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, and he referred to 'underdeveloped countries where standards of living are often unworthy of human dignity'.... and again echoing John: '[mankind].... will be singularly blessed by the Lord if men truly recognise one another as brothers rather than as competitors.'

Speaking in several languages at his coronation ceremony at the beginning of the second session, the new Pope addressed the whole Council in much the same terms (St Peter's 30 June 1963). Three years later, Pope Paul's achievement had been to steer the Council to a conclusion in the face of many difficulties. A way forward for the Church was outlined in the documents but almost everything remained to be implemented. A successful implementation was and remains of the essence as Bishop Butler observed: 'What matters in the end is the successful achievement of the Council's intentions.' (*The Theology of Vatican II*, revised & enlarged 1981, p.100). While Pope Paul seemed to do his best to balance the unfortunately nick-named 'progressive' and 'conservative' tendencies, he - perhaps over-insistently - injected one personal theme: the retention of the papal prerogatives. This seems to be a conclusion agreed by almost every commentary. It is purely conjecture here, that it was that insistence together with the fact that the conservative minority - mainly in the Curia and in close proximity to Pope Paul throughout - which resulted in the *Nota Praevia Explicitava*. This note was inserted with reference to the key teaching on collegiality. The adverse results of this note, not voted on nor 'authorised' by the Council, have yet to be resolved.

The Four Movements Providing Conciliar Themes

The outcome of the Council, as embodied in the sixteen documents that were promulgated by an overwhelming assent of the Council fathers, was the result of a number of theological movements that were taking place in the decades prior to Vatican II, sometimes with papal encouragement as already mentioned.

Ecclesial or Patristic Movement

One of the movements was to recover an understanding of Church founded on biblical and patristic sources. These sources provided an understanding of the early Church as a communion of local Churches, with the bishop as the focus of unity, sharing a common faith but with a certain diversity of practice in a society which was largely pagan. Discovery of documents from the early patristic period in the late 19th century contributed to a renewed understanding of the episcopate. In the early Church the episcopal order conferred the fullness of priesthood which, in

the 20th century, necessitated a re-evaluation of the relationship not only between bishops and priests but also between bishops and, in particular, with the bishop of Rome. It meant that the pyramidal model of Church, which had established itself since the Constantinian era, where the pope was at the apex and then proceeded, in descending order, with bishops, priests, religious and laity firmly at the base was no longer an authentic representation. Instead, the much flatter communion model with greater equivalence between the local Churches not only challenges the established monarchical mode of governance, but would be a model more appropriate from the ecumenical perspective.

Other documentary discoveries indicated a more extensive process of Christian initiation in the early Church especially for adults. This is particularly relevant because of the similar context of Christianity in the early centuries and the late 20th century. The position of the Church in the modern world is not too dissimilar to that of the first two or three centuries, namely, that the Church operates in a predominantly non-Christian environment. A more extensive process of formation was, and is, needed particularly for adults having no previous contact with the faith both in traditional mission territories and in the de-Christianised west. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) not only contributed to the liturgical renewal, but also has the potential for the involvement of the whole local community in the Church's mission of evangelisation. The process is also orientated around a scriptural-based catechesis which reflects the renewed emphasis of scripture at the heart of the Church's life.

Biblical Movement

The renewed emphasis on scriptural foundations coincided with a flourishing of Catholic scriptural scholarship as a consequence of Pius XII's 1943 encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, which embraced the historical-critical method to provide a more coherent understanding and interpretation of scriptural texts. This *magna carta* for scriptural studies, as scripture scholar Fr. Raymond Brown S.S. called it, came after a particularly restrictive period in Catholic biblical scholarship. In the early part of the 20th century the Church was fighting against the perceived heresy of Modernism, a complex of elements which included the notion that scripture was a record of a real unfolding of divine truth in history and that the scriptural writers were subject to the limitations of other historians. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, established in 1902, started to police the situation by pronouncing on biblical interpretation and authorship through a series of decrees during the period 1905-1915 which bound Catholic scholars. Fifty years later, in 1964, the same Commission issued the instruction, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, on the historicity of the gospels which fully embraced the historical-critical method that had been criticised earlier on as being part of the Modernist movement. The teaching in this document was incorporated into *Dei Verbum* the following year.

Liturgical Movement

The greater emphasis on scriptural foundations also had import in the liturgical movement which could be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century with St. Pius X's call for full, active, conscious participation of all the faithful in the liturgy (his *motu proprio* of 1903 on sacred music, *Tra le Sollecitudini*) and more frequent recourse to receiving communion (his 1905 decree *Sacra Tridantina Synodus*). As part of his promotion for frequent communion, Pius X, in 1910, enacted that children should receive communion on reaching the age of reason at around the age of seven. Underpinning Pius X's call was a resurgence in Benedictine monasticism which

had started in 1833 in France (Solesmes) and followed later in the 19th century in Germany (Beuron, Maria Laach), Belgium (Maredsous, Mount Cesar) and the USA (St. Vincent's Latrobe Pennsylvania, St. Meinrad's Indiana, St. John's Collegeville Minnesota). Many of these communities became a resource for the liturgical renewal by restoring Gregorian chant and other lost liturgical treasures as well as publishing literature in the form of periodicals and new missals.

Pius XII's 1947 encyclical on the liturgy, *Mediator Dei*, gave official, if cautious, approval for liturgical renewal. In the decade that followed there was further liturgical reform. The 1956 Congress on Pastoral Liturgy at Assisi was an important event for the liturgical reform movement. It was at this gathering that Augustin (later cardinal) Bea gave a paper, *The Pastoral Value of the Word of God*, stressing the unity between 'the Word of God and the Bread of Life' where the priest 'is as much minister of the Word as minister of the sacraments' and 'in him the liturgical movement and the biblical movement should meet and blend'. This was a portent of changes to come.

All the elements of the liturgical movement provided the momentum for the formulation of the Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, at Vatican II. Not only was there a greater emphasis on proclaiming a greatly expanded repertoire of scripture in the liturgy, but increased participation, especially receiving communion, provided a liturgical expression of the renewed understanding of the Church as all of God's faithful people and all that this implied for the life of the Church in communion and mission.

Ecumenical Movement

The ecumenical movement, started in the early 20th century, was largely without Catholic involvement except for some limited unofficial dialogue in the early 1920's. The theology of the Church forged at Vatican II provided the relationship of the Church with the other Christian traditions in more positive terms than had hitherto been the case. The Council gave the green light for full participation of the Catholic Church in the search for Christian unity which had already been underway for over fifty years.

It was in the process of generating the teaching on ecumenism that the Council fathers gave greater consideration of the Church's relationship to Judaism, against the backdrop of the holocaust, and to other world faiths. Whilst the teaching on the Church's relationship to other faiths was brief it did provide a basis for dialogue which has greatly expanded in recent years and is now given a much greater priority in the 21st century for the sake of peace in the world.

The Church's Relationship To The World

It was during the sessions of the Council that a document (*Gaudium et Spes*) was generated that saw the relationship of the Church to the world in a more positive light. There was recognition that there could be mutual enrichment and that the Church was no longer simply perceived as the good and a bulwark against an essentially evil world. It provided an opening for a dialogue which took account of human development and understanding of the world in which the Church was situated.

The Council Documents

In total sixteen documents were completed comprising some 100,000 words of Latin text. As already mentioned, many were the result of certain theological and liturgical movements which were already taking place in the Church.

The [diagram](#) of Council documents show the four central constitutions and their approximate relationship with the nine decrees and three declarations. The distinction in title is to indicate the grade of importance to attach to each. It is not possible, however to indicate precisely the relationships between the various documents. It is possible to offer examples of the interweaving nature of many subjects or themes: a prime example being the influence of scripture. God's Revelation, as recorded in the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament, is the foundational principle as without the Incarnation and all that followed there would be no Christianity. To make only minimal connections with other debates, for example, on the early Church an understanding of Scripture, linked to Tradition, must inform Roman Catholic relations with other Christian traditions, not least the Orthodox. Scripture is vital in liturgy, which also needs to relate as far as possible to other traditions and, to conclude these inadequate examples, Scripture must inform the study of the Church itself from earliest times until today - not least with the Orthodox Churches of the East. Two other examples must suffice here: the recovered recognition of the significance of a common baptism brought back into sharp focus the importance of *The People of God*. This led to the Decree on the Lay Apostolate, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*. In *Lumen Gentium*, the Council Fathers put the *People of God* before the hierarchy to emphasise the importance of the common baptism. And then in dealing with the hierarchy, it became clear that a separate document was needed; in turn this led to the Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office, *Christus Dominus*.

Therefore to attempt an overall view, most of the other documents of the Council depend on *De Ecclesia*, 'On the Church', which became generally known by its opening words *Lumen Gentium*. From *De Ecclesia* depend the documents on Bishops, Priests, Lay Apostolate, Religious Life, Missionary Activity, Ecumenism, and Non-Christian Religions. It is easy, therefore, to understand Bishop Butler's insistence that the spirit in which the Council documents were formed was vital and that it is necessary to treat the ongoing development of Council teachings as a whole.