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Where the Vatican Council Stands

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After two solid months of discussion the first session of the Vatican Council broke up on 8th December, and the 2,300 Bishops returned to their dioceses throughout the world. They will return again in September for the second session.

At this stage it is natural to ask what was accomplished in all those meetings from October to December. Yet when we look for resolutions and decisions taken, there is little to show. It is true that several topics, including the question of the Liturgy, have been extensively treated; and the decrees hammered out in long discussion are ready for the vote in September.

But the real achievement of this session does not lie here. It lies in something less tangible, but of tremendous importance for the final outcome. To understand this it is first necessary to know that even before the Council met, it was quite clear that there would be two trends at work in it.

THE TWO TRENDS

For simplicity's sake, they can be called the conservatives and the liberals or progressives—though this is dangerously close to an oversimplification. Such a division is natural enough. It is found in any body of men meeting for any purpose. In fact, it would be rather unhealthy if it were not present.

It has become alarmingly clear that in our day it is not just this or that religious truth that is under attack, rather it is the very foundation of religion itself. The possibility of morality, of objective truth, of peace and justice are questioned. A new age is coming to birth with new attitudes and terrible new problems. It is to this new world that the Church must speak the Word of God.

In the face of such a situation, two trends of thought could—and did—crystallize in the Council. One of them, which we call the conservative trend, stresses the body of Christian truth and is rather afraid of such things as current Biblical scholarship, the ecumenical movement, etc. This group feels we cannot adapt the Christian message to modern problems without compromising the Word of God.

The other trend—the liberals or progressives—are rather the pastors of souls. (The first group are often more in administrative posts). They feel themselves responsible for the crowds of Christians and non-Christians who, today, do not have access to the truth and life that Christ brings. It is not Christian truth that falls short, they say, but its presentation, its dress, which is not that of today, but of a former age. They, too, reject any compromise with the truth revealed in God's Word; but they want that same truth dressed and offered to men in a way and language that they can understand today.

With this broad—and almost oversimplified—division in mind, it is easier to see what the Council has done in its first session.

CHRISTIAN UNITY

As the days wore on in the Council, it became clear that the Bishops had taken very much to heart Pope John's constant reminders over the last four years of the urgent need for Christians to face up to the confusion and chaos of the modern world in a realistic way, and to restore Christ's saving message to its rightful place in that bewildered world.

In the context of widespread irreligion, uncertainty, hunger, misery, nuclear threats, exploitation, etc., the question of Christian Unity takes on a note of extreme urgency. Confronting these problems of today's world, the followers of Christ are tragically enfeebled by their dividedness, to say nothing of quarrels. Divided, opposed Christians only add to the world's bewilderment, and they go counter to Christ's prayer 'that all may be one' (John 17:21).

The presence of 37 Observers from other Christian bodies, even though silent in the discussions, had a tremendous influence. The constant concern of the Bishops was to consider their feelings and to say nothing hurtful. In addition, the Observers saw and heard what no Catholic saw and heard, for the sessions are held in secret. Many were struck by the free discussion and frank criticism they witnessed.

A TURNING POINT

For three years before the Council assembled, ten preparatory commissions set up for various topics called for suggestions, sorted, discussed and hammered them into workable schemes for discussion. Every Bishop (and Observer) received them in advance for his own study. Enormous work went into their preparation.

For the most part they had been prepared by professional theologians and Bishops in the more administrative posts of the Church, and so by men with less direct pastoral experience. They mostly fitted the first trend, labelled the conservatives.

But when the Council began to discuss these schemes, it was apparent that many Bishops were not happy with them. The criticism repeatedly heard was that they were too narrow, too juridical, too scholastic and not pastoral, Biblical nor ecumenical enough.

A climax came when the Council Fathers showed their dissatisfaction with the scheme of proposals on the relation of Scripture and Tradition. It was put to the vote, and 63 per cent of the 2,300 Bishops were for having it reworked before consideration. This 63 per cent fell just short of the required two-thirds majority. But here Pope John made a remarkable intervention (the only time he did), and ordered the scheme to be prepared again.

Commentators are agreed that one of the highlights of the first session was the speech of Bishop de Smedt of Bruges (Belgium), a member of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. It was delivered at just this time. It has since been published outside the Council, and as it reveals much about the trends and climate of the Council, we can quote it extensively.

'All Council Fathers sincerely and positively desire that the schemes treated here should foster unity. The views on a specific scheme differ, however, some saying it answers the requirements of ecumenism, others saying it does not.

'The problem is this :

'What is required in the doctrine and style of a scheme in order that it may truly serve to bring about a better dialogue between Catholics and separated Christians ?

'Here is my answer :

'All who have the honour of being called Christians have this in common, that they recognize the existence of Jesus Christ. That which has been communicated by the Lord himself constitutes "the deposit of faith" and we are saved through it. All of us, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, have recourse to this one same source. But when it becomes a question of "how" we come to Jesus Christ then discord begins. We are brothers separated from one another. For very many centuries now we have been cut off from one another.

'We know that this discord of ours is contrary to the will of Christ. When will this division of ours ever cease? For many centuries we Catholics have thought it enough to make a clear declaration of our doctrine. Other Christians have had the very same idea. Each side has expressed its doctrine in its own terminology, from its own point of view, but what was said by Catholics was misinterpreted by other Christians and vice versa. By this method of "clearly stating the truth" no progress towards reconciliation has actually been made. On the contrary, prejudices, suspicions, polemical discussions and quarrels on both sides have increased.

' In the last ten or twenty years a new method called "ecumenical dialogue" has been introduced. In what does it consist? The characteristic of this method is that it concerns itself not only with truthfulness, but also with the manner in which a doctrine is explained, so that others may understand it correctly. Christians of various denominations help each other arrive at a clearer and more exact understanding of doctrine to which they themselves do not subscribe. Ecumenical dialogue therefore is not a study or tract on bringing about union, it is not a council of reunion, it is not an attempt at conversion. *It simply means giving testimony of one's own faith to another in a serene, objective and lucid manner, using the principles of psychology valid in every human dialogue.*

' This new method can now be adopted in our Council, according to the will of the Sovereign Pontiff. Our conciliary expositions will have an ecumenical spirit and will be able to favour the ecumenical dialogue greatly, if we employ means truly capable of making non-Catholics understand more clearly how the Catholic Church sees and lives the mystery of Christ.

' It is not an easy thing to draw up a scheme in ecumenical style. First of all every trace of indifferentism must be excluded. An ecumenical exposition must faithfully portray the complete and integral Catholic doctrine on a given point. Else how could other Christians come to know from us what Catholicism really teaches if the doctrine that we present is incomplete, distorted or confused? An ecumenical manner of speech is therefore not opposed to an integral presentation of the truth. One who holds this opinion does not understand the true nature of ecumenical dialogue. Such a dialogue is not undertaken so that the two parties may be mutually deceived.

' If we wish our doctrine to be understood by separated Christians, several conditions must be fulfilled. Here are some of them:

' (1) We must have a clear idea of the present-day teaching of the Orthodox and Protestant Churches. In other words, we must be well acquainted with their faith, their liturgical life, and their theology.

' (2) We need to know the opinions they have of our doctrine, the points that they understand correctly and the points they do not understand.

' (3) We must know what non-Catholics feel is missing or not sufficiently explained in Catholic doctrine. (For example, the doctrine on the Word of God, on the priesthood of the faithful, on religious liberty).

' (4) We need to examine whether our manner of expression contains statements or ways of saying things difficult for non-Catholics to understand. Here I would like to point out that the

so-called scholastic manner of speech or the method used in theological schools constitutes a serious difficulty for non-Catholics and often gives rise to errors and prejudices. The same must be said for an abstract and purely intellectual manner of speech, which is not understood by Orientals. On the other hand a Biblical and patristic manner of speech by itself would avoid and should prevent many difficulties, prejudices and confusion.

'(5) The terminology used must be well chosen (words, images, qualifications), with due regard being given to the reaction that may be caused on the mind and sensibilities of non-Catholics.

'(6) Judgements must be well thought out and seen in the context in which they will be acceptable to the non-Catholic.

'(7) Arguments, argumentation and the arrangement of the text itself should be so presented that they are convincing to non-Catholics.

'(8) All forms of sterile polemics should be avoided.

'(9) Errors should be indicated in a way that is not offensive to the persons in error.

'It follows from all this that a text is not ecumenical from the sole fact that it exposes truth. It is very difficult and very delicate to make a presentation truly ecumenical.

'We have heard numerous Fathers judge of the ecumenical nature of the proposed scheme. Some have said that it lacks an ecumenical spirit: thus have spoken the Fathers who live among Protestants and Orthodox. Fathers who for the most part live in Catholic countries have spoken otherwise. To them it seems that the scheme does not lack an ecumenical spirit. Let us be pardoned, but we humbly beg these Fathers to be willing to examine well if they have sufficiently considered the nature of the new method which is called ecumenical dialogue, its conditions and its consequences.

'Be that as it may, we who have received from the Sovereign Pontiff the charge of working in order that the dialogue with our separated brothers should be happily established in this Council, ask you all, respected Fathers, to be willing to hear what the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity thinks of the proposed scheme. Our opinion is that it notably lacks an ecumenical character. This scheme does not constitute a progress for dialogue with non-Catholics, but an obstacle; much more, it is harmful to it.

'Respected Fathers, kindly consider that at last, today, a new method has been started, thanks to which a fruitful dialogue can be undertaken. The fruit of this method can already be seen in this hall, in the presence of the Observers. This is a providential hour, but it is grave. If these schemes are not presented in another way, we shall be responsible for the fact that the Second Vatican Council will have destroyed a great, immense hope. I mean the

hope of all those who, with John XXIII, wait in prayer and fasting for a step to be taken now towards the brotherly union of all those for whom Christ Our Lord prayed, "May they all be one."

CONCLUSION

It can be said, then, that this first session has produced little in the way of concrete decisions. But it has done much more. It has created a climate, and the Council has found its way. To grasp what this means it is necessary to realize that here were gathered in one assembly over 2,000 Bishops from every race, with different backgrounds, outlooks and problems. Some from old Christian countries, others from new ; some from countries like Spain and Italy with almost no contact with other Christians. And out of all this, more than mere inoffensive generalizations were wanted. Now the Bishops have all seen clearly the problems facing the Catholic Church in different parts of the world.

The way is now clear for the second session in September. The schemes are being re-formulated according to the known mind of the Bishops. The Council can now tackle the immense task that faces it. And in the meantime, the Bishops have nine months in which to reflect and study the questions at home in their dioceses.

Today's world is not very interested in the old quarrels among Christians. The present tragedy is that modern man does not recognize Christ in His Church, because he is not drawn by the way it speaks or the dress in which it presents the unchanging truth of God's Word.

Pope John has said again and again that he expects the Council to give Christian answers to questions that are troubling men. What has already happened was completely unexpected. As one commentator remarked, 'It seems that the Holy Spirit has taken over.'

High hopes are placed in it, and we can all pray that it may follow closely the path that God has marked for it, so that as a result Christ Our Lord may shine more clearly to modern man, as the Light of the World.

(This article was written before the death of Pope John XXIII, whose death meant that the Council was automatically suspended. However, his successor, Pope Paul VI, in his very first address, declared his intention of continuing the work of the Council, which he said would be one of the main works of his pontificate. He also stresses that he would continue the work of Pope John for promoting Christian unity. The next session of the Council is being convened in late September).