

Chapter 7

Who Changed What at Vatican II?

Collegiality? The only collegiality traceable to the Apostles was in the Garden of Gethsemane; they all ran away.

Cardinal Ottaviani

Perhaps the most startling fact to emerge ... is the extraordinary ambivalence of Pope John's own role.

Eamon Duffy

The prediction during the collegiality debate that the pope would lose his freedom of action would hardly be verified by the succeeding decades of papal history.

Aidan Nichols

Only the pope is authorized to call an Ecumenical Council – a rule endorsed by Vatican II – but when Angelo Roncalli was elected and took the name of John XXIII in 1958 on the death of Pius XII, he was a supposedly stopgap pope and few expected him to follow the tentative leads of his two predecessors and actually call one. Yet during the first announcement on 25 January 1959, he stated that he intended to ‘come to grips with the spiritual needs of the present time’ and in an allocution to the Franciscans on 16 April that he wanted ‘to define clearly and distinguish between what is sacred principle and eternal gospel and what belongs to the changing ages’. Though he then referred to an ‘updating’ and a letting of fresh air into the Church – he is said to have thrown open a window by way of illustration – so that her evangelizing mission could proceed more effectively in the modern world, yet no one really

understood then – nor perhaps do we now – quite what he wanted to achieve, though a number of his directives before the Council, together with his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* – a text replete with unexpectedly long lists of rights deriving from human dignity – indicate a desire that more attention be paid to (some sort of) ecumenism and to the needs (as he saw them) of the increasingly dechristianized Western world. They certainly implied less of a siege-mentality in dealings with Orthodox and Protestants.

What the pope did make clear from the very beginning of the Council was that it was to be not primarily ‘dogmatic’ but ‘pastoral’, though the word ‘pastoral’ (soon to become a useful cliché) had not yet assumed – certainly not in John’s mind – its later connotation as a device to change Church *doctrine*. According to this, some hoped that newly established ‘traditions’ would eventually lead to traditional teachings – or some of them – becoming obsolete: in theological (or Marxist) jargon already current in the Church, that new orthopraxy might be able to ‘reform’ old orthodoxy. Yet for Pope John not only did ‘pastoral’ imply that no new dogmatic decisions were intended but (perhaps) that, and as it turned out, some of the final decrees of the Council were to be accorded more weight than others: a new feature for Ecumenical Councils.

Uncertainty about the sense of ‘updating’ was to prove toxic. Perhaps John relied on the Holy Spirit to blow the correct understanding of the term into conciliar minds and wills. Certainly, he seems to have supposed that a few traditional formulae could be changed without the doctrines they were supposed to express being similarly – if not wilfully – altered. Indeed, he appears to have had no idea of the radical cultural changes his updating might demand, and many took him to imply that scores of traditional practices (and even beliefs) should be abandoned. In the upshot the Council never applied itself to determining which should go and which stay. Yet already on 30 September 1964 Cardinal Meyer of Chicago observed that not all traditions should remain unchanged; cases needed to be looked at individually. This did not happen, and as some – not least the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger – would later point out, the Council offered no Theology of Culture to which reformers and conservatives alike might appeal in determining what should go and what remain.

At the opening of the Council most delegates were more concerned – whether in hope or dread – that the new pope wanted to return to an apparently major piece of unfinished business from Vatican I: how to restore the balance between pope and bishops. There was a second source of concern, or of puzzlement; it seemed that Pope John had not decided

at the outset of the Council what role he himself, as pope, should play in the proceedings. He later and significantly in *The Journal of a Soul* would note that 'the ecumenical Council is entirely the initiative and in principle under the jurisdiction of the pope'. Later too he wrote that, 'It has been on my conscience, I confess, that *contrary* to what happened in the first two months, from October 11 to December 8, the pope should take his proper place, discreetly indeed but as the real president by supreme right, as head of the Catholic Church.'

Perhaps most informative about John's aims and the power he knew he possessed is a conversation he had on 9 February 1963, with yet another Jesuit editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica*. Roberto Tucci noted in his diary that the pope remarked that 'during the first session he had preferred not to intervene in the debates, so as to allow the fathers themselves freedom to discuss and the opportunity to find the right path ... And they had done so.' Tucci also recorded that John said he was 'completely satisfied' with the proceedings of the first session. In other words, he did know at least something of what he wanted and was watching to be sure that his wants were what the Council (or those who most influenced it) wanted. Had the Council gone the 'wrong' way, that is, he would have had to intervene earlier. He knew that all depended in the end on his own will – and certainly not on the will of the curial cardinals. Prominent among these, Alfredo Ottaviani, in command of the then Holy Office, was to be humiliated at the Council's very outset and as the obvious target of a recorded papal comment that members of the Curia 'have a petty, restricted mentality, because they have never been outside of Rome, outside of their village'.

That said, it seems rash to suppose, as have a number of commentators on the Council, that a rethinking of Church teaching on more 'Christological' lines was John's intention from the start. Such an approach certainly became dear to Paul VI when he took over and certainly characterized many of the Council's final decisions, but to suppose that such an expression of *aggiornamento* was always clear in John's mind looks too like an argument from hindsight.

As for the bishops now summoned to Rome, they too seemed puzzled as to what the Council was to do and what their own role was supposed to be. As noted, it was widely believed that Vatican I needed to be completed insofar as it had defined the authority of the pope in detail but had left the powers and authority of the bishops in limbo. Yet, as we shall see, when Vatican II closed, that was still largely the case. Certainly, some bishops – plus many of their favourite theologians, especially those from France, Germany and the Benelux countries – hoped for

radical change. It remains unclear how radical many of them would have preferred it to be.

When summoned, then, the bishops seemed uncertain as to what role they were to play. Were they simply to obey orders (once they had discovered what the orders were) or were they were to take a major, even decisive, role in determining the outcome of whatever deliberations they were going to be asked to engage in? Giuseppe Alberigo, a distinguished historian of the Council, has expressed a common view of the situation they faced as follows:

After the Vatican Council of 1870, Prussian Chancellor von Bismarck had maintained that from then on the Catholic bishops were simply local representatives of the pope; only the pope had effective power and authority over the Catholic church. Even though Pius IX denied this thesis, the bishops until the end of the pontificate of Pius XII appeared increasingly to be subordinate to the pope and the Roman Curia, which the reform of Pius X had strengthened and which had the Holy Office as the supreme congregation. A large part of theology and canon law had provided a doctrinal basis for this attitude. The social philosophy of the modern centralized state also provided an 'analogue' that was very influential and was adopted [by popes].

As we shall see, the bishops were eventually induced to achieve – or drifted into achieving – a combination of two apparently conflicting possibilities: both to obey orders and also to play a major role in determining eventual procedures and outcomes. Going beyond Bismarck, Alberigo nuances what he – and they – believed to be their situation as follows:¹

Pius XII's *Mystici Corporis* made up for the fateful omission of Vatican Council I by solemnly affirming the dignity of bishops as successors of the apostles and head of the particular Churches but it also repeated that 'they are not entirely independent, because they are subjects to the rightful authority of the Roman pontiff, even while they enjoy the ordinary power

1. G Alberigo, 'Transition to a New Age', in G Alberigo and J.A. Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 5 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis; Leuven: Peeters, 2006), p. 615.

of jurisdiction, which is communicated directly to them by the same Supreme Pontiff’.

One of the aims of the present chapter is to see whether Vatican II eventually changed this situation or merely varied it, and at the outset I should emphasize again that I am less concerned to identify what was intended than with what was effected by Vatican II’s conciliar activity.

There were, of course, sociological parameters within which the Council’s deliberations began: on the one hand John XXIII’s refreshing simplicity – appearing no longer as a prince of the Church handing down a condescending spiritual largesse to his subjects, but as a brother in Christ – won him the kind of popularity and sympathy with which the sufferings of Pius IX or Pius XII at the hands of the political powers of their days had gifted his predecessors. Many Catholics – not least the bishops at the Council itself – wanted to do what the ‘good’ pope – *il papa buono* – wanted them to do: a goodwill which quickly spread into the world outside the Church, further enhancing its effects within.

But what *did* the good pope want, apart from letting fresh air into what he plainly perceived as a stuffy, inward-looking institution that might seem to have passed its sell-by date? How did he propose to do that? What were to be identified as the specific issues where change was essential? As it turned out, not the relationship between pope and bishops (though that was not ignored) but, along with the language and form of the liturgy, disputes over the relationship between tradition and scripture were to be at the heart of many of the ensuing debates, accompanied by unprecedented discussions of religious freedom: a *right* to religious freedom, that is, as distinct from toleration. There was also, as we shall see, an attempt, clearly in line with Pope John’s intentions, to bring the Church into ‘dialogue’ (a favourite if ambiguous word of John’s successor Paul VI) not only with the ‘separated brethren’ but with the ‘modern secular world’, though the understanding of that world with which the Conciliar Fathers struggled was already in many significant aspects looking like ‘old hat’, as new problems (not about justification, grace and the Trinity but about ecclesiastical authority and sex) were coming over the horizon.

One thing is and was clear: many theologians (if not at first bishops) wanted radically to alter the approach of the Church to other Christians, other religions and the secular Western society, and hoped that John’s unexpected decision to call a Council would give them that opportunity. They knew that papal support was essential, and were not yet sure what the pope actually wanted. However, apart from such

‘political’ considerations, we need to recall two substantial, if underlying, theological points at issue.

First, although there was little sympathy for the wishes of some of the more progressive theologians that Aquinas’s thought should be altogether sidelined – rather he is recommended as the pre-eminent doctor of the Church in sections 15 and 16 of *Optatam Totius* (the decree on the Training of Priests, 28 October 1965) – the ‘progressives’ disputed the post-Vatican I version of his account of the relationship between grace and nature, seeing it as a perversion of his thought and as too radically separating the natural from the supernatural. They followed De Lubac in rejecting Cajetan’s interpretation of Aquinas’s treatment of the relationship between grace and nature (widely taught since Vatican I) which seemed grossly to underestimate the (though limited) goodness of man as created and as to a degree surviving the ‘fall’.²

The progressive critics were probably right in thinking that Aquinas’s view had been perverted, though whether he had been better interpreted by De Lubac than by his opponents (in earlier days principally Garrigou-Lagrange) is (or should be) less important than identifying the right theological account of the matter. Strictly speaking, the view of Aquinas is of historical rather than of urgent theological concern, though if centuries of Catholic teaching had got him wrong that also should have been relevant to the coming debates, not least about infallibility.³ For if previous centuries have seriously misinterpreted arguably the Church’s most authoritative thinker since New Testament times, broader questions about the security of Catholic teaching can hardly be avoided, and nor can the possible need to re-examine whether it was a mistake of the magisterium to put so much trust in even a corrected interpretation of Aquinas.

After Cajetan and his followers, the second target of the progressives was the Jesuit Suarez, another neo-scholastic interpreter of Aquinas – this time as a voluntarist – and accorded much weight, as we have noted, by ‘manualist’ followers of Leo XIII. According to his critics the effect

2. For comment see S.M. Fields, ‘*Ressourcement* and the Retrieval of Thomism for the Contemporary World’, in Flynn and Murray (eds), *Ressourcement*, pp. 356–57. De Lubac’s view is not to be confused with that of Rahner, who chooses to speak of a ‘supernatural existential’.

3. Debate about the position of Aquinas continues; De Lubac’s refutation of Garrigou-Lagrange has been most recently rejected by F. Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and his Interpreters* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, Sapientia Press, 2010).

of his work had been that in catechesis Christianity had been widely reduced to the learning of propositional truths and commands, so de-emphasizing a personal relationship between Christ and the believer.

At the start of the new pontificate Cardinals Ottaviani of the Holy Office and Ruffini of Palermo – both of whom had been consulted during Pius XII's meditations on a new Council – had urged Pope John to call one. In their view what was required was to confirm the policies of the recently deceased Pius: and to condemn the application of 'form' (or genre) criticism in biblical studies – a particular concern of Ruffini, himself a former professor of Bible at the Lateran and strong critic of the Biblical Institute in Jerusalem. Desired might also be to add a further Marian dogma of Mary as co-redemptrix, Mariology being, as we have seen, especially attractive to ultramontanes – and certainly to renew attacks on the wicked ideologies of the day, meaning a supposedly continuing 'modernism' and especially Communism – and in language with which the Church was by now long familiar. That language, and the ideas it expressed, would certainly have been welcome to most of the members of the Theological Commission set up under Ottaviani's guidance by Pope John before the Council began, in order, it was assumed, to keep a keen eye on any challenges to 'orthodoxy'.

This the new Commission hoped to sustain through a revised 'Profession of Faith': roughly an updated version of the *Syllabus of Errors* and of Pius X's *Pascendi*, and much disliked by many theologians, though seemingly as yet by few bishops. De Lubac was later to summarize this common distaste both for the 'Profession' itself and for the wider vision of the 'Roman theologians'. For him the schemata originally drawn up by the Curia for the Council to debate were controlled by 'the rules of a very strict and shallow scholasticism, concerned almost exclusively with defence and lacking in discernment, tending to condemn all that did not fit perfectly well with its own perspective'.⁴ In the event, the 'Profession' attracted little interest. What survived rather longer was the predictable 'Roman' desire for secrecy about the details of the Council's proceedings and a marked hostility to the press whose variegated reports the Vatican failed effectively to control, not least because of a steady drip of leaked information by Council participants, increasingly aware of the power of the press in the contemporary world – if less of the question 'Who is using whom?'

Pope John's actions while the new Council was being prepared might seem contradictory: on the one hand he appeared to want substantial

4. H. de Lubac, 'A Theologian Speaks', in *30 Giorni*, July 1985.