

Renewal from the source

The interpretation and reception of the Second Vatican Council

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I. The Council – an unfinished story

The evening of 25 January 1959 has remained fixed in my memory. I was a young priest then, and I was listening to the radio news with some friends. TV did not exist yet. We could not believe our ears when we heard that Pope John XXIII had convened a Vatican Council that day. That was like lightning from a blue sky. After the Second World War, I had grown up in the Catholic youth movement of that time. There I heard about and absorbed the concerns of the liturgical movement, the Bible movement and the beginnings of the ecumenical movement. During my studies in Tübingen I learnt from the great theologians of the Tübingen school of the 19th century that tradition has to be understood not as a static but as a living tradition. Pope Pius XII, who was greatly revered in Germany, opened doors with his encyclicals *Mystici corporis* (1943), *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943) *Mediator Dei* (1947); but towards the end of the pontificate we felt the stagnation. Nevertheless we held great hopes and expectations. But none of us had ever dreamed of a Council.

The sense of a new start, the discussions and the enthusiasm that the Pope's announcement stimulated is hard for young people today to imagine. When I was studying theology at Tübingen University from 1952 to 56 it was forbidden to attend lectures in the Protestant Theological Faculty. Because it was forbidden, it was of course very enticing. But now it was as though a dam had been opened; everything happened in a rush. We met Protestant theologians and talked the whole night long. And we kept hearing news from Rome, that the forces in the Roman Curia were trying to quickly blow out the little light of progress that had been lit. And then on the eleventh of October 1962, this time sitting in front of the TV, we were relieved and enthusiastic once more as we heard the Pope's opening address, in which he warned against the prophets of doom, and spoke of an *aggiornamento* of the church.

For my generation the Council has remained a formative influence until this day. The experiences of that time have remained a fixed point of reference for my theological thinking. But for most people today the Council has long been past history. All who are younger than sixty did not consciously experience the new departure of those days. For them the Council belongs to another age and another world. It was the age of the Cold War, a year before the start of the Council the Berlin Wall was built, and during the first sessions the Cuba crisis took the world to the brink of nuclear war. In that situation Pope John XXIII published his famous encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, (Peace on earth) (1963).

Today, 50 years later, we live in a totally different and rapidly changing globalised world, with many new challenges. The optimistic belief in progress of those days, and the spirit of a

new departure towards new boundaries which pervaded the Kennedy era, have disappeared long ago. For most Catholics the developments set in train by the Council, such as the liturgical renewal, have become part of the everyday life of the church. But what we now experience, at least in Europe, is not a great new departure and not the spring-time of the Church that we expected then, but instead a stagnating church and with signs of crisis. Now many are of the hope, that the new pontiff Francis, who calls himself bishop of Rome, will bring back enthusiasm and vision of the future.

Already in the last year, in connection with the Jubilee of the Council, there has been a lot of talk about the Council.¹ People are asking: Where do we go from here? Back to before the Council or forward beyond it? Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI both called the Council a trustworthy compass for the course of the Church in the 21st century. But the needle of the compass is still wavering restlessly. With a little exaggeration, a Roman newspaper in 2005 published an article on the 40th anniversary of the closing of the Council with the headline *È guerra sul concilio*: “At war over the Council”. A German newspaper said something similar: there is a battle raging over the liberal agenda of the Council. It is clear that the interpretation of the Council is disputed in many respects, and that the Council has left us an agenda that is still a long way from being completely worked through.

Anyone who knows the history of the 20 councils recognised as ecumenical, will hardly be surprised. Post-conciliar times were almost always turbulent times. Think of the Arian controversies following the first general council of Nicaea (325), or the secession of the Oriental Orthodox churches (Coptic, Syrian, Armenian etc) after the fourth general council of Chalcedon (451). Most councils were only able to prevail after a difficult reception process. In the case of the Second Vatican Council it is no different.²

¹ Recent interpretations: G. Alberigo-A. Melloni, *Storia del Concilio Vaticano II*. P. Hünermann (Hg.), *Das II. Vatikanum – christlicher Glaube im Horizont der globalen Modernisierung*, 1998; P. Hünermann- B. J. Hilberath (Hg.), *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, 5 Bde., 2004-2006; G. Alberigo, *Breve storia del concilio Vaticano II*, 2005; A. Marchetto, *Il Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II. Contrappunto per la sua storia*, 2005; W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 2008; O. H. Pesch, *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil*, 1993/2010; Ch. Theobald, *La réception du concile Vatican II*, 2009; W. Kasper, *Katholische Kirche. Wesen-Wirklichkeit-Sendung*, 2011, 31-38; R. de Mattei, *Il Concilio Vaticano II. Una storia mai scritta*, 2010 (dt.: *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil. Eine bislang ungeschriebene Geschichte*, 2012); W. Brandmüller u.a., *Le “chiavi” di Benedetto XVI per interpretare il Vaticano II*, 2012; J.-H. Tüch (Hg.) *Erinnerung an die Zukunft. Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil*, 2012; K. Koch, *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil. Eine Bilanz: Die Hermeneutik der Reform*, 2012; A. Marchetto, *Il Concilio ecumenico Vaticano II. Per la sua corretta ermeneutica*, 2012; J. Ratzinger/Benedikt XVI., *Zur Theologie des Konzils* (Ges. Schriften, Bd. 7), 2012. *Überblick über den Stand der Forschung*: H. J. Pottmeyer u.a. (Hg.), *Die Rezeption des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils*, 1986; G. Alberigo, in: *Geschichte des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils*, Bd. 5, 619-654; F. X. Bischof (Hrsg.), *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil (1962-1965). Stand und Perspektiven der kirchenhistorischen Forschung im deutsch-sprachigen Raum*, 2012.

² On the understanding of the reception: Y. Congar, *La « réception » comme réalité ecclésiologique* (1972), in: *Église et Papauté*, Paris 1994, 229-266; A. Grillmeier, *Konzil und Rezeption*, in: *Mit ihm und in ihm*, Freiburg i. Br. 1995, 303-334; G. Routhier, *La réception d'un concile*, Paris 1993; W. Beinert, *Die Rezeption und ihre Bedeutung für Leben und Lehre der Kirche*, in: W. Pannenberg-Th. Schneider (Hg.), *Verbindliches Zeugnis*, Bd.2, Freiburg i. Br. – Göttingen 1995, 193-218; Ch. Theobald, *La réception du concile Vatican II*, Paris 2009.

But the Second Vatican Council is still a special case. Unlike the previous councils, it was not called to discern false doctrine or to reconcile a schism, it did not proclaim any formal dogma or pass any formal disciplinary resolutions. John XXIII had a much more comprehensive perspective. He did not want any condemnations or delimitations. Instead he saw the coming of a new age, and sought an *aggiornamento* of the church, bringing it up to date. By that he did not mean any trivial conformity to the spirit of the times. He spoke of the pastoral goal of the Council. It was meant to express the traditional faith of the Church, whose abiding validity he left in no doubt, in a new contemporary form so that it could reach people's hearts and shed light on the problems of the day. "*Lumen gentium*", the "Light of nations", were the opening words of the Constitution of the Church; Christ should once more be the light of the peoples of the world. The Church is to share the "*Gaudium et spes*", the joy and hope, sorrows and fears of humanity, especially the poor and oppressed.

The overwhelming majority of the Council Fathers grasped his vision. For them the pastoral intention did not mean that they wished to deny its dogmatic character. Even though the Council did not proclaim any new formal dogma, the intention was to speak of the faith in an authentic, magisterially binding manner, and renew it. In view of the "signs of the times", they wanted to proceed from Sacred Scripture and the tradition of the first millennium and not see the Church in the first instance as an institution or organisation, but as a mystery, as the people of God, the body of Christ and the house of the Spirit. They wanted the liturgy to be understood not simply as a solemn and sacral rite but as the representation of the paschal mystery of Christ, with the active participation of the whole people of Christ. They wanted to overcome the Constantinian era of the symbiosis of church and state, the one-sided anti-reform and anti-modernist mentality of the last centuries, and take up the concerns of the biblical, liturgical, patristic, pastoral and ecumenical renewal movements between the two world wars, to open a new chapter in the burdened history of the Church with Judaism, and enter into dialogue with the other religions and with modern culture. It was to a certain extent a modernisation program that did not want modernism but a renewal from the sources. Pope John Paul II made the point precisely in his program for the new third millennium. He said it involved a *ripartire da Cristo*³, a new departure with Christ as the starting-point.

That was a fascinating program. An influential minority, however, resolutely opposed this attempt by the majority. They remained captive to the structure of Neo-Scholasticism, and defended the post-Tridentine tradition in a one-sided manner. The successor to John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, unjustly a too much forgotten Pope, was in principle inclined towards the concerns of the majority, but sought – following ancient conciliar tradition – to achieve, if at all possible, a united consensus on the passing of the Council documents. He succeeded: all 16 documents were passed almost unanimously. But that came at a cost. In many places – as in previous councils – compromise formulations had to be found, in which the position of the majority often stands directly side by side with the position of the minority with their concern for demarcation.

³ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter "Novo millennio ineunte" (2001), 29.

So the Council texts contain enormous conflict potential; they open the door for a selective reception in one or the other direction. Vatican II is a council of transition. It wanted renewal without giving up the old. For this synthesis of old and new, however, the Council could only set the framework for the post-conciliar reception. So the question arises: In which direction does the compass of the Council point, and where is the Church heading in this still young third millennium? Will it maintain the confident trust of John XXIII and the renewal from the source, or take the path back to defensive anti-reform and anti-modernist attitudes? That is the question facing post-conciliar reception.

II. Three phases of reception

We can distinguish three over-lapping phases of reception so far. At first there was a phase of enthusiasm. In a lecture immediately after his return from the Council, Karl Rahner spoke of “the beginning of a beginning”.⁴ But Rahner remained cautious regarding further developments. Others went further and wanted – as they felt – to set aside the baggage of tradition as an unnecessary compromise, and – leaping over almost 2000 years of church history – to interpret the church’s doctrine anew on the basis of Scripture. They felt that after the first-stage rocket had been ignited by the Council, it was now time for the second stage. But this second stage rocket soon looked like a space ship beyond the reach of ground control.

The reaction was not long in coming. It did not come only from the Fraternity of Saint Pius X founded by Archbishop Marcel LeFebvre; it came also from theologians who had been counted among the progressives at the Council (Jacques Maritain, Louis Bouyer, Henri de Lubac). Unlike Le Febvre they did not criticise the Council itself, but its reception. Joseph Ratzinger, who as a young theologian had played a significant part in the Council as a *peritus*, had struck a cautionary note already at the first German Catholic Assembly after the Council, in Bamberg in 1966; as Cardinal he arrived at an on-the-whole critical evaluation of the post-conciliar situation in his report, “The Situation of the Faith” (1985). And with good reason. In the first two decades after the Council an exodus of priests and members of orders had taken place, in many spheres there was a noticeable decline in ecclesial praxis, and protest movements had arisen among both laity and priests, above all after the Encyclical “*Humanae vitae*” (1968) on the transmission of human life. Pope Paul VI spoke of the smoke of Satan that had penetrated into the temple of God through some kind of cracks.

Some critics went so far as to consider the Council an accident, and the greatest catastrophe in recent church history. But it would be a knee-jerk reaction to consider that everything that happened after the Council happened because of the Council. The critics fail to recognise the long-term trends in religious sociology which were taking effect even before the Council, and which erupted in the social upheavals connected with the student and youth protests of 1968 from San Francisco to Paris, Frankfurt and Berlin. The emancipatory tendencies of that time

⁴ K. Rahner, *Das Konzil – ein neuer Beginn*. Mit einer Hinführung von Karl Kardinal Lehmann, 2012; vgl. G. Wassilowsky, *Universales Heilssakrament Kirche*. Karl Rahners Beitrag zur Ekklesiologie des II. Vatikanum, Innsbruck-.Wien 2001.

also had consequences in the ecclesial realm. The progressives during the Council were in fact the true conservatives: they turned back to the older traditions in order to break up the later encrustations. But now progressives of a new kind began to speak out: they did not take their orientation so much from the earlier tradition but from the “signs of the times”, and wanted to interpret the gospel with a view to humanity today and the changed social situation. This is in principle legitimate for the Council itself. But it becomes problematic if the doctrine of the faith threatens to become a doctrine of a purely secular salvation, as occurred in some (not all) forms of Liberation Theology.

The Extraordinary Synod of Bishops of 1985 had the task of drawing the balance 20 years after the end of the Council. This led to a third phase of reception. The Synod was aware of the crisis, but did not want to join in the widespread lamentation.⁵ They spoke of an ambivalent situation, in which beside the unmistakable negative aspects – increasing secularisation and a worrying superficiality, as well as the ideological reinterpretation of the faith – there were also many good fruits of the Council. The liturgical renewal which led to a greater emphasis on the word of God and to a more active participation of the whole celebrating congregation, the ecumenical rapprochements, the opening up to the modern world and its culture, and much more. In principle the Synod emphasised that the Church was the same in all councils, and the last Council was to be interpreted in the context of all other councils.

With this principle the Synod became a crystallisation point for the third phase of reception, the magisterial reception. The first official step towards reception was the liturgical reform, above all the introduction of the new missal, which came into force on the First Sunday of Advent 1970. This reform was accepted with gratitude by the overwhelming majority of the faithful, but it also encountered criticism, partly for theological reasons, but partly also because many missed the sacrality and the aesthetic of the previous rite. Benedict XVI therefore in 2007 permitted the use of the ‘pre-conciliar’ rite once more as an extraordinary form. That solved some problems, but gave rise to new problems, which must now be dealt with in the new pontificate.

One further step was that Pope John Paul II in 1983 promulgated the new Code of Canon Law initiated by John XXIII, with the intention of translating the conciliar doctrine of the Church into canonical language and legal forms. Some canonists understand the new Code as the ultimate magisterial interpretation of the Council,⁶ a position I hardly can share, because

⁵ W. Kasper, *Zukunft aus der Kraft des Konzils. Die außerordentliche Bischofssynode `85. Die Dokumente mit einem Kommentar*, Freiburg i. Br. 1986.

⁶ N. Lüdecke, *Der Codex Iuris Canonici* Arnold (Hg.), *Die deutschsprachigen Länder und das II. Vatikanum*, Paderborn 2000, 209-237; G. Bier, *Rechtsstellung des Diözesanbischofs nach dem Codex Iuris Canonici von 18`983*, Würzburg 2001. Dagegen B. J. Hilberath, *Der CIC als authentische Rezeption des Zweiten Vatikanums*, in: *ThQ* 186 (2006) 40-49. von 1983: *Krönung des II. Vatikanischen Konzils?*, in: H. Wolf-C. Arnold (Hg.), *Die deutschsprachigen Länder und das II. Vatikanum*, Paderborn 2000, 209-237; G. Bier, *Rechtsstellung des Diözesanbischofs nach dem Codex Iuris Canonici von 18`983*, Würzburg 2001. Dagegen B. J. Hilberath, *Der CIC als authentische Rezeption des Zweiten Vatikanums*, in: *ThQ* 186 (2006) 40-49.

canon law, as important it is, treats only with the institutional and not with the inner and mystic aspect of the Church, which was fundamental for the Conciliar renewal. Others criticise the fact that in spite of many improvements, the new canon law lags behind the Council (for example in the question of collegiality and the participation of the laity), and has not fully received the Council.⁷

Finally in 1992, on the 30th anniversary of the opening of the Council, Pope John Paul II published the “Catechism of the Catholic Church”, initiated by the Synod of 1985. He understood the Catechism as a contribution towards the renewal of ecclesial life as it was intended to be introduced by the Second Vatican Council.

This official phase of the reception without doubt led to a consolidation of the ecclesial situation. It has in the meantime however reached its limits. The Council unleashed a dynamic which goes on and calls for a further step in the realisation of the Conciliar agenda within a world of rapid change. Let us ask why: Where do we stand now after three phases of reception?

III. Light and shadow in the post-conciliar situation

In the first place, one should acknowledge, in spite of the widespread discontent, that there is no lack of positive aspects. The Council documents are not dead letters. They have shaped the life of the dioceses, parishes and local communions through the renewal of the liturgy as well as through a stronger biblically-based spirituality and the active participation of the laity, and stimulated ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. It has led to a charismatic renewal. The multiplicity of charismata and the general call to holiness were given a new radiance and many evangelical (in the original meaning of the word) elements concerns were taken up. There are attentive observers of Church development, who predict a future evangelical Catholicism.⁸

Nor did the official reception stand still. To some extent it went above and beyond the Council. That occurred for example in the case of the liturgical reforms: the Council had still retained the Latin language as the rule for liturgical language, and had not yet discussed the orientation of the direction of the celebration towards the people. It is similar also in the case of the implementation of the religious freedom proclaimed by the Council after lengthy debates, and of the “policy” of human rights, with which John Paul II made an essential contribution to overcoming the Communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe. The encyclical *Ut unum sint* (1995), the first ecumenical encyclical ever, added depth to the ecumenical statements of the Council and took them further energetically. The various interreligious prayer encounters at Assisi (1986; 1993; 2002; 2011) extended the interreligious dialogue

⁷ H. Legrand, Vierzig Jahre danach, Wie steht es mit den kirchlichen Reformen, die das II. Vaticanum beabsichtigt hatte, in: *Concilium* (D) 41 (2005) 397-411; G. Wassilowsky (Hg.) *Zweites Vatikanum – vergessene Anstöße, gegenwärtige Fortschreibungen* (QD 207) Freiburg i. Br. 2004; F. X. Bischof, *Steinbruch Konzil? Zu Kontinuität und Diskontinuität kirchlicher Lehrentscheidungen*, in: *MThZ* 59 (2008) 194-210.

⁸ J. Allen, *The Future Church*, 2012; G. Weigel, *Evangelical Catholicism. Deep Reform in the 21st Century Church*, 2013.

prompted by the Council. All of that has brought positive change to the face of the Church both within and without.

At the same time, the shadows must also be mentioned. Many of the impulses given by the Council have so far only been implemented half-heartedly, such as the significance of the particular church, the collegiality of the episcopate, the shared responsibility of the laity especially the role of women in the Church. And in contrast, the centralism of the Curia has increased. A series of recent events have also shown how much the Roman Curia is itself in urgent need of reform and modernisation, a need clearly expressed by the congregations of cardinals preceding the last conclave and now taken up by Pope Francis.

Ecumenism, another important concern of the Council, has borne many good fruits, more than could have been expected at the time of the Council. In the interim a noticeable cooling-off has occurred in the official conversations with the churches both of the East and of the West. The causes are many, and are located on all sides. In the relationship with the churches of the Reformation it has become clear that the different understanding of the church results in a different understanding of the unity of the church, so that to a large extent there remain irreconcilable concepts of the goal of ecumenism: full communion in truth and love or mutual recognition though remaining differences?

There are also pastoral problems, for example ethical questions which directly touch the real lives of many of the faithful. Many of these questions have in fact led to a kind of horizontal schism between that which is taught as obligatory “above”, and that which is actually practised “below” and is mostly silently tolerated. One must also mention the lack of priests, which is becoming increasingly obvious in many particular churches, in many instances leading to the merger of parishes into a new kind of mega-parish. Last but not least, the abuse crisis has led to a substantial loss of credibility of the church.

Both laity and theologians have presented many concrete demands for reform. Some of these demands, like the improvement of legal culture and transparency, merit consideration, others such as the ordination of women, cannot be accepted by the Church which is bound by the existing foundations of the faith. Other churches and communities which have conceded to a large extent to such wishes, churches which have no Pope, no Curia and no celibacy, which ordain women and grant their blessing to second or third marriages or same-sex partnerships, are no better off when it comes to making the gospel contemporary and moving people to faith. Obviously the sustainability of the church does not in the first instance depend on these issues. On the contrary, a church that leans on the social mainstream becomes ambivalent in the literal sense of the word, and in the end superfluous. The church is interesting only when it stands up for its cause credibly and convincingly, and gives voice to social criticism when it must.

Further on, we cannot envisage the future of the Church only from a typical Western perspective and forget that many, many Christians suffering persecution and oppression in many other parts of our world. The blood of these martyrs is – as it was in the first Christian

centuries – the seed of new Christians and of a new future of the Church. They, living in the dark, are the very light of the Church.

Concluding this part of our reflexion we can state: The lights and the shadows show that the impetus of the Council is still far from being exhausted even 50 years after it was opened. So we have to ask what is the responsible way ahead beyond restorative and nostalgic dreams or utopian visions. In order to answer this question we have to deal anew with the Council documents. Many people talk on it without having ever read its texts. We should not turn the Council into a myth or reduce it to a few cheap slogans. We should read the texts and ask for the adequate hermeneutic of the Council, that is, to look for the right method of interpreting it. Only then can we unearth the undiscovered treasures of the Council.

IV. In search of the Council hermeneutic

Recently a vigorous debate has arisen regarding the question of the hermeneutic of the Council. All serious interpreters are agreed that it is not permissible to turn the Council into a quarry for finding the required answer to every question. But at the same time it is not permissible to cite some vague spirit of the Council. The starting point must be the Council texts, and they must be interpreted according to the generally recognised rules and criteria for the interpretation of the Council.⁹

It is crucial to extract the meaning of a Conciliar statement carefully from its often complicated editorial history, and then to set that within the complex and tension-filled totality of all the Council statements, and then to understand this totality in turn within the totality of the tradition and its historical development, as well as its subsequent reception. Finally, each individual statement must be interpreted within the framework of the hierarchy of truths (UR 11), that is, from its Christological fundament and centre.

A Council is however not an assembly concerned with the production and editing of documents. Each Council has its place in a specific historical situation, it is an extraordinary event which accrues symbolic significance. Such symbolic actions and symbolic events imprint themselves on the collective memory of the Church even more strongly and more deeply than the dogmatic formulae which mostly are difficult for the average Christian to understand.¹⁰ So the simple fact alone that a Vatican II took place following Vatican I, with

⁹ On Council hermeneutics: W. Kasper, Die bleibende Herausforderung durch das II. Vatikanische Konzil. Zur Hermeneutik der Konzilsaussagen, in: *Theologie und Kirche* Bd. 1, Mainz 1987, 290-299; O. H. Pesch, Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil. Vorgeschichte-Verlauf-Ergebnisse-Nachgeschichte, Würzburg³ 1994, 148-160; K. Lehmann, Hermeneutik für einen künftigen Umgang mit dem Konzil, in: G. Wassilowsky (Hg.) *Zweites Vatikanum – vergessene Anstöße, gegenwärtige Fortschreibungen* (QD 207) Freiburg i. Br. 2004, 71-89; ders., Das II. Vatikanum – ein Wegweiser. Verständnis-Rezeption-Bedeutung, in: P. Hünemann (Hg.), *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil und die Zeichen der Zeit heute*, Freiburg i. Br. 2006, 11-26. Einen Überblick über die unterschiedlichen methodischen Ansätze findet sich bei Hünemann, *Herders Theol. Kommentar*, Bd. 5, 7-10; J.-H. Tück, Eine „reines Pastoralkonzil“? Zur Verbindlichkeit des Vatikanum II, in: *IkaZ Communio* 41 (2012) 441-457.

¹⁰ Both the reform-inclined Giuseppe Alberigo (cf. Note 1) and the restoration-inclined Roberto de Mattei (*II Concilio Vaticano II. Una storia mai scritta*, Torino 2010) have pointed this out.

its definition of the primacy of jurisdiction and the infallibility of the Pope, has a symbolic significance. It makes it clear that the Church is not an monarchist institution but is, as *communio*, essentially concerned with communication. Therefore, in critical situations the successors of the apostles followed the example of the Jerusalem Apostolic Council in assembling in order to seek under the leadership of Peter and the other apostles consensus in the Holy Spirit. But they did so of course with the involvement and the approval of the whole congregation (Acts 15). This could be an important indicator for the further progress of the reception of the Council. It is, under the leadership of the *magisterium*, a matter for the whole people of God.

Pope Benedict XVI initiated the latest phase of the Council hermeneutic in his address to the members of the Roman Curia on 22 December 2005. Following the Synod of 1985 he made it clear that consensus must not run only synchronically (referring to the present church), but also diachronically (referring to the Church of all ages). In this sense he contrasted two hermeneutics with one another, the hermeneutic of breaks and discontinuity, which he rejected, and the hermeneutic of reform and renewal. In this confrontation it is important that the Pope did not, as often claimed, set the hermeneutic of discontinuity against the hermeneutic of continuity. The Pope did not speak of hermeneutic of continuity, he spoke of a hermeneutic of reform and of a “renewal of the Church while maintaining continuity”.

This formula is important. It involves a continuity which does not simply repeat tradition, but means an innovative continuity which does not make the tradition look old, but proves it to be forever young. In the sense of Johann Adam Möhler (+1838) and John Henry Newman (+1890) it involves a living tradition which allows the never consumed, always inexhaustible novelty newness of Jesus Christ (Irenaeus of Lyon) to constantly shine anew. The tradition is indeed in the end a work of the Holy Spirit, who leads the Church into all truth (John 16:13).

When the Pope spoke of a hermeneutic of reform, that means reform in the sense of the medieval tradition, not just the constantly necessary practical adaptation of individual paragraphs. Anyone who speaks of reform assumes that deficits and failings exist which make it necessary to fulfil the prophetic and Jesuanic call to conversion, and to be aware that the Church is always in need of purification and must abidingly walk the path of repentance, renewal and reform (LG 8; UR 4). Yves Congar, one of the most influential *periti* during the Council, therefore distinguished between the one tradition (singular) and the many traditions (plural) which give expression to the one tradition in an historically-determined manner, and must therefore be deepened, interpreted and in part corrected again and again.¹¹

In which direction such an interpretation can lead us Pope Francis indicated already in the first days of his Pontificate. He spoke of a poor church for the poor. This is his hermeneutical key for Vatican II. For already the Council spoke in a unfortunately seldom quoted paragraph

¹¹ Y. Congar, *La tradition et les traditions*, 2 Bde., Paris 1960.1963. On the understanding of tradition see the foreword to the new edition by W. Kasper, *Die Lehre von der Tradition in der Römischen Schule* (WKG 1), Freiburg i. Br. 2011, 13-19.

of *Lumen gentium*, that as Jesus carried out the work of redemption in poverty and oppression so the Church is called to follow the same path, not to set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim, and this by her own example, humility and self-denial and by her closeness to all those, who are afflicted by human misery (LG 8,3). This reference to the cry of the poor recur in many instances and should give raise to an interpretation not ecclesologically self-centred but open to those who in the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount are called the blessed.

So Pope Benedict's address and Pope Francis interpretation could help to rekindle the fire of the Council, and give new force to the innovative impulse of the Council once more. According to an often-quoted phrase from Thomas More (+1535), tradition is to pass on not the ashes but the fire. So let us reflect in a final section what a new beginning in the footsteps of the Council could mean. Where can and should this path lead us?

V. A new departure in the footsteps of the Council

In what follows I can only suggest a few viewpoints that seem important to me.¹² The Council took up some important concerns of modernity in a critically constructive manner. Today, half a century later, we have moved from the modern to the post-modern era, which calls in question many of the ideals of the Enlightenment. The belief in progress and the trust in reason of that time have been shaken. That does not mean that the Council is no longer relevant. On the contrary! The Christian faith by its very nature seeks understanding. It was Anselm of Canterbury who established the axiom "*Fides quaerens intellectum*". The Church must therefore continue to take seriously the legitimate concerns of the modern age. Just as it defends the faith against post-modern pluralism and relativism, it must also defend it against anti-rationalist fundamentalist tendencies. Thus it becomes an ally in a quite unexpected way of a properly understood Enlightenment. This viewpoint was important for John Paul II in his encyclical *Fides et ratio* (1998), and for Benedict XVI it has become absolutely central.¹³ We dare not fall under the spell of a fundamentalist or emotional or sentimental understanding of the faith and withdraw into a falsely understood pious corner; we must give everyone an account (*apologia*) of the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15) and in dialogue argue as advocates for the faith. The Church needs good theologians.

A second viewpoint: since the Second Vatican Council the Church has become universal in a new way, it is the one church of Jesus Christ and must make itself at home in varied and diverse cultures. The world in which we live is economically, technologically, and in its media a globalised world network, but a culturally and religiously diverse world in which intolerable social differences persist and political and military conflicts lie in wait. The world today is afflicted by the plague of international terrorism, and in many countries by a new wave of persecution of Christians. Following the evangelisation of Europe in the first millennium, the evangelisation of Africa and the Americas in the second millennium, today in

¹² For further aspects see W. Kasper, *Katholische Kirche. Wesen-Wirklichkeit-Sendung*, Freiburg i. Br. 2011, esp. 483-488.

¹³ Address in Regensburg 2005; *Motu proprio* "Porta fidei", 2011; General audience 21 November 2012.

the third millennium Asia with its ancient advanced cultures and its growing economic and political power is the great challenge. That confronts the Church with the problem of unity and diversity in a totally new way.

Unity through the Petrine office is a great good for us, and a gift from the Lord to his Church. But advocating a centre does not mean accepting excessive centralism. Already in 1963 still as a professor Joseph Ratzinger pointed out that unity in the Petrine office need not necessarily be understood as an administrative unity, but leaves room for a range of administrative, disciplinary and liturgical structures.¹⁴ In the Encyclical *Ut unum sint* (1995), John Paul II proposed the consideration of new forms of exercise of papal primacy. That is of fundamental significance for the progress of ecumenical dialogue, but for the Catholic Church itself it is also an important challenge. Its unity cannot be understood as anything but unity in diversity and diversity in unity. It is here that the core problem of the reception of the Council still remains unresolved.

A third viewpoint. The problem of unity and diversity is epitomised today in the question of the freedom of each individual human being and each individual Christian. Kant defined the program of the modern Enlightenment in this way: “Have the courage to use your own reason”. Today we often speak of the individualisation of life-choices and of faith. We speak of mature citizens and mature Christians. The Council addressed this issue in its statements on conscience. It defined conscience as the centre and sanctuary of humanity, in which the human being is alone with God and hears his voice in his inmost being (GS 16). Joseph Ratzinger, again, analysed this statement meticulously already in 1968 and arrived at the conclusion that the Council had not thought its statement through to the end.¹⁵ He was of the opinion that one should follow the problem further in the footsteps of John Henry Newman (+1890). Newman concludes his famous letter to the Duke of Norfolk (1874) as follows: “Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, (which indeed does not seem quite the thing) I shall drink, - to the Pope, if you please, - still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards.”

For Newman the conscience is the real representative of Christ, the place where the authority of the Church reaches its internal limits. The Church cannot take the place of the personal conscience. On the other hand the individual in order to distinguish the quiet voice of God in us from the loud voices around us must listen to the voice of the Church and take note of what others before and beside him hear or have heard as the Voice of God. In order to arrive at a responsible decision he must take advice, while at the same time the formation of conscience and advice regarding it must become an important pastoral task. Following the informed (as we say) conscience is not the easy path on the broad highway of current opinion and the applause of the masses; it will often be the narrow, steep and lonely path. That is shown by the many martyrs of the past century and our century, who risked and gave their lives at the

¹⁴ Article. Primat, in: LThK VIII (1963) 761-763.

¹⁵ LThK Supplementary volumes Vat. II Bd. 3 (1968) 328-331.

call of conscience. The call of conscience is not an easy matter but a very serious, and often a deadly serious one.

Conscience as the echo of the voice of God brings me to the final and most important point, the question of God. That seems to me today to be the fundamental question. The Council counted atheism in its various forms as one of the serious phenomena of this age; it also had enough humility to confess the share of blame Christians bear for this situation (GS 19). Since then the situation has intensified dramatically in our secularised western world. The problem is not so much the theoretical atheism of the 19th century, nor the so-called new atheism which proceeds from an ideology based on evolutionary theory or brain research.¹⁶ It is a practical atheism, in fact an indifference regarding the question of God.

The secular option seems by now to be considered normal by many people. They are no worse than the average Christian, they live more or less like you and I, and they do not seem to feel that anything is lacking.¹⁷ But according our understanding something important is lacking. Thomas Aquinas calls it *acedia*, what does not mean only laziness but spiritual listlessness, a kind of sadness and desperation, which does not reach the very measure of the human being.¹⁸

So we can no longer worry only about the social, cultural and political effects of faith and take belief in God for granted. And above all we cannot impress these new pagans with questions of internal church reform. These questions of church reform are interesting for insiders. But the people outside have other questions. They ask: Where do I come from and where am I going? Why and for what purpose do I exist? How to find happiness? Why is there evil and suffering in the world? Why must I suffer? How can I come to terms with that and live with it?

The present situation demands that we be theologians, theologians whose task is speaking (*logos*) of God (*theos*). That is not a new agenda but the agenda that one of the greatest theologians of Christianity, Thomas Aquinas, who said already in the 13th century right at the beginning of his *Summa theologica* that the subject of theology was God and everything else insofar as it relates to God.¹⁹ In doing so, as Christian theologians we must not speak vaguely about a divine being as all forms of religion do more or less, we must speak concretely of the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ as love (1 John 4:8.16), as God with us and for us, as God infinitely merciful, who aspects us, who in every situation concedes us a new

¹⁶ On the earlier problematic: W. Kasper, *Der Gott Jesu Christi* (1982)(WKGS 4), Freiburg 2008, 63-108; on the recent problematic: M. Striet, *Wiederkehr des Atheismus. Fluch oder Segen für die Theologie?*, Freiburg i. Br. 2008; G .M. Hoff, *Die neuen Atheisten. Eine notwendige Provokation*, Kevelaer 2009.

¹⁷ C. Taylor *A Secular Age*, Cambridge (Mass.)-London 2007.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica* I/II q 35 a.8; II/II q. 20 a. 4; q. 35.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica* I q. 1 a. 7.

chance and to whom we can in all situations say “Abba, father”. We have to speak on the mercy (*misericordia*), which is – as Pope Francis told – is the name of our God.²⁰

Without the personal foundation of faith, and without personal life born out of faith and committed in love and mercy for the poor, everything else leads nowhere. The old trench warfare between conservatives and progressives do not lead anywhere. Without a solid foundation of committed faith everything else literally floats in the air. We must in the first instance awaken new faith, hope and love. We need a theocentric turning-point in pastoral life. The joy of the Lord is our strength (Neh 8:10).

To conclude: the Council dared to take a step into a new era of church history. It did not point the way to a liberal conformist church, but to a church spiritually renewed from its sources, which is at the same time a church open to dialogue and engaged in the cause of humanity. This path has not yet reached its end. We have perhaps not even completed half of the course. We have to continue along this path with patience and courage, and overall with joy in order to overcome the sadness of the world (2 Cor 7:10). Joy is contagious whereas laments are repulsive. When we renew the joy being church the Council wanted to set alight then this joy will pass also to others and the church can proceed with a new prophetic power in a rapidly changing and profoundly insecure world. Then the church can be a compass and an encouraging sign of hope for many. This confident faith is what we should learn from Vatican II, so we can engage in theology and form the church on the basis of a new joy in faith. For that goal I wish to all of us, especially to the growing younger generation above all strength, patience, courage and joy!

²⁰ W. Kasper, *Barmherzigkeit. Grundbegriff des Evangeliums – Schlüssel christlichen Lebens*, 2012.