

AN AGENDA FOR VATICAN II

Joseph A. Komonchak

Pope John XXIII had been in office less than a hundred days when he announced the Second Vatican Council on January 25, 1959, an act by which he was to become "a transitional Pope" in a more significant sense much deeper than was probably in the minds of those who had elected him at the age of seventy-eight. The nature of the transition the Council effected is at the heart of the battle underway today over the interpretation and evaluation of the Council and its reception. For some the transition was epochal, the sort of shift described when people speak of the end of the Constantinian era, the close of the age of Christendom. For others this interpretation overlooks the elements of continuity in a Council which never intended to produce a revolution in the Church.

One way out of this at times ideological impasse is a careful historical analysis of the state of the various local Churches when the preparation of the Council began. A piece of the evidence needed for such a study is the collection of proposals sent by the U.S. Bishops in 1959-1960 in response to the Vatican's request for their advice about an agenda for the Council. The Antepreparatory Commission appointed to set the Council's agenda decided not to send out a detailed questionnaire but to leave the bishops free to submit proposals on doctrine, discipline, Church activities, contemporary challenges, and anything else they thought appropriate.

The U.S. Bishops responded generously. All but nineteen of the 136 residential bishops replied (86%; 93% when you exclude ten dioceses which had a change of bishops in 1959-60). Of 80 titular bishops, 32 replied (40%). (Fifteen bishops wrote to say that they had no proposals to make.) Most social scientists would be content to receive as full a reply to a survey.

The U.S. responses take up nearly 250 pages in the official Vatican tome published in 1960. The longest reply was Archbishop Rummel's ten-page text; seven other bishops sent five pages or more. The vast majority of the texts were of two pages or less. Most of the replies were discursive in style, but some were very schematic, little more than lists of topics. The replies sent by Meyer (Chicago), Schulte (Indianapolis), Rummel and Caillouet (New Orleans), Brady (St. Paul), Binz (Dubuque), Cushing (Boston), Cody (Kansas City-St. Joseph), Primeau (Manchester), and Marx (aux., Corpus Christi) stand out from the rest for the breadth of their vision and their alertness to contemporary conditions.

Tardini had told the bishops they could consult "expert and prudent churchmen [*viri*]," and it appears that most did so, although much remains to be discovered about the breadth of consultation and the process of drafting. Although a few claimed to know what their people thought, no bishop said he consulted lay people.

There was no nationwide collaboration among the bishops in the preparation of their proposals. At the national meetings of U.S. Bishops in 1959 and 1960, proposals for a collective response were turned down. The U.S. Bishops would not begin to act collectively with regard to the Council until the early days of the first Session. This lack of corporate sense is also evident in the fact that only one bishop (O'Hara) even uses the word "college" and that the only mention of episcopal conferences is from Vagnozzi, the Apostolic Delegate!

Even more surprising are the apparent lack of regional or provincial collaboration and the absence of local or regional concerns. Only seven bishops referred to specific problems in their own dioceses and fewer still to any regional concerns. None of the bishops of the Southwest, to take an example, mentioned the fact that so many of their people are Mexican Americans. For the most part, if one did not know the identity of a bishop and his diocese, one would never guess it from the content of his text.

Generalizations are difficult, first, because of the huge number of topics suggested which range from the reform of nuns' habits, permission for priests to carry the sacred oils in their cars, and extraterrestrial creatures to restatements of central doctrines, dealing with racism and nuclear war, and religious freedom. Some bishops passed easily from one category to another. Mitty (San Francisco) wanted the Council both to address the split between private and public morality and to issue a dogmatic definition of the objective reality of hellfire. Nold's (Galveston-Houston) call for a discussion of just war theory is preceded by concerns about using abstract art in churches.

There was also a good deal of variety in the implied agenda of the Council. It should be remembered that Pope John XXIII had been in office for less than a hundred days when he announced the Council and that his advanced age left some doubts as to whether the new spirit he represented would endure very long. Most of the bishops included both doctrinal and practical issues, a third discussed only the latter, some of them appearing to see the Council simply as a means for reforming Canon Law, and nine of them spoke only of doctrine. Almost two-thirds of the bishops confined their proposals to matters affecting the internal life of the Church and said nothing about challenges facing the Church because of economic, social, political, or cultural conditions.

Almost all of the bishops who commented on it welcomed the announcement of the Council. Most of these emphasized the ecumenical purpose that was so prominent in Pope John's early statements. A few concentrated on the need to reaffirm or to clarify doctrine in order to meet a spreading indifferentism, secularism, and materialism. Only Hannan (Scranton) saw no need for disciplinary change or doctrinal clarification and promised to oppose at least radical innovations.

On internal Church matters there was a broad range of concerns. Doctrinally, there was an impressive amount of interest in a richer ecclesiology, stressing the Church's organic and spiritual dimensions, validating the roles of lay people, and increasing the authority of the local bishop. Reservations about contemporary theology were rare. Contrary to popular opinion and perhaps surprising the leaders of the liturgical movement, there was a great deal of support for the reform of worship, covering nearly every dimension of it and including the introduction of English. Only five bishops expressed some cautions about the liturgical movement. Priests received a great deal of attention, under over twenty headings: the reform and translation of the Breviary, the lack of vocations, the reform of seminary-training, dealing with priests who left the ministry, etc. Sixteen bishops were in favor of restoring the diaconate as an active ministry. There was a very large number of calls for reform of the Church's marriage-legislation.

To avoid anachronistic evaluations, it may help to place the comments about external challenges in the context of a series of controversies which enlivened the American Church in the 1950s. One of the liveliest of these concerned *Church-State relations* and the question of *religious freedom*. The silencing of John Courtney Murray had attempted to put an end to a bitter controversy over the issues among theologians. The issue was kept alive, however, by a series of public controversies which often pitted Catholic bishops against a group called Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (POAU). Drawing on the most extreme representatives of the alleged Catholic "thesis," the POAU regularly opposed as threats to American democracy the efforts of the bishops to secure state-aid for the children in their schools, to oppose the spread of birth control, and to defend certain forms of censorship. The tension was exacerbated when the POAU demanded special scrutiny to be given to Catholic candidates, this shortly after John F. Kennedy announced his candidacy.

Thirty-six of the U.S. Bishops (24.3%) included the issue of Church and State and religious freedom in their letters to Rome. Even most of the general comments asked for

attention to the special conditions facing the Church in a pluralistic society. Alter (Cincinnati), who had long defended Murray, basically repeated his argument for the religious neutrality of the State. Schulte (Indianapolis) borrowed his distinction between the philosophy underlying the French Revolution and that supporting the U.S. Constitution. Flanagan (Worcester) noted the difficulties caused Catholic candidates by the traditional thesis. Three bishops argued the need to rethink or at least reformulate the doctrine of the Syllabus of Errors. Only Boland (Newark) posed the issue in the terms used by Murray's critics. If others did not raise the question, it may have been by deliberate decision as in the case of Cardinal Spellman who was advised not to mention it for fear that Rome would confirm the more extreme view.

The tensions caused by the Church-State controversy and by the antics of POAU (which itself heaped scorn on "brotherhooders"), help to explain that Ecumenism was not a major concern of American Catholics in the 1950s. In 1956 Reinhold Niebuhr remarked that "the relations between Catholics and Protestants in this country are a scandal and an offense against Christian charity." The 1948 Instruction of the Holy Office was interpreted here as discouraging ecumenical activities, and although it had called for establishing regional and diocesan offices to direct the effort at reunion, none appears to have been established. The pioneers of ecumenical activity in this country, such as Gustave Weigel, John Sheerin, and George Tavard, received little episcopal support.

It is a surprise, then, not only that 48 U.S. Bishops discussed ecumenism but that 40 of them did so quite positively. Thirteen of them cited Pope John's ecumenical intentions, and several noted that this goal had been enthusiastically welcomed in and outside their churches. Six of them spoke of reunion as the primary goal or most important task of the Council. This sudden surge in ecumenical interest on the part of the U.S. Bishops can only be explained, it seems, by the example and the urgings of Pope John himself. When it began to seem that ecumenism was being downplayed in favor of the purely internal goals of the Council, Bishop Schenk (Crookston) wrote a vigorous letter of protest.

There were other views, of course. Five bishops saw little prospect of Christian unity, except perhaps with the Orthodox. McIntyre described the corruption of the faith among most Protestant leaders and denied that disciplinary concessions would have a positive effect on them. Bartholome (St. Cloud) said that "in the U.S.A. this unity cannot be realized without a miracle of grace."

Common to both groups of bishops was a view of ecumenical unity as the return of schismatics and heretics to the one true Church of Christ. Primeau (Manchester), Binz (Dubuque), and Feeney (Portland), however, had a broader view which included the need for genuine dialogue among the churches. Several bishops asked for the establishment of permanent ecumenical offices at all levels of Church life.

The ecumenical question also affected some of the doctrinal issues raised by bishops. If some wanted the adage, "Outside the Church no salvation," discussed in order to oppose a tendency towards indifferentism, others wanted discussion of the salvation of non-Catholics (three referring to the case of Fr. Feeney). Although a majority of those who raised the issue wanted new Marian definitions, several bishops warned they would have fatal consequences for ecumenism. Many bishops asked also for a clarification of Catholic teaching on the relationships between Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterium. Finally, several bishops wanted a consideration of the problems of daily contacts with non-Catholics, including the question of shared worship.

Few things seemed to obsess the U.S. bishops during the 1950s more than the threat of *Communism*. Senator McCarthy's efforts were still a fresh memory, the Cold War was at its most

frigid, and the bishops had vigorously condemned Communist persecution of the Church no fewer than five times in the decade. In this light the number of bishops who mentioned Communism is surprisingly small: only 20 of them (13.5%). Several of the references are general or oblique; but Cody warned against Communist efforts to divide the faithful from the hierarchy, particularly by trying to exploit the race-question. Others asked the Council to respond doctrinally, by emphasizing the doctrines of original sin and of our supernatural destiny. Three bishops wanted expressions of support for persecuted Catholics. All in all, a quieter consideration of the topic than might have been expected.

In the late 1950s the issue of *race* was about to explode in the U.S., and it was being felt in the Church particularly over the question of the integration of Catholic institutions. In 1956 a poll of southern Catholics found 75% of them in favor of segregated schools, in 1959 the vast majority of Catholic schools in the South were still segregated, and in 1957 a few New Orleans Catholics had appealed to Pius XII against Archbishop Rummel's prophetic statements.

Statistically, the number of bishops who mention the question of racism in their proposals to Rome is very small: 12 of them (8.1%), five from northern dioceses, six from southern, and O'Boyle of Washington. Requests came from the bishops of Chicago, Detroit, and Washington, which had seen large increases in the numbers of blacks. Lengthy and eloquent statements were made by Rummel and his auxiliary, Caillouet. Why the other bishops did not mention the problem is not easy to answer. Indifference can certainly be ruled out in the cases of bishops such as Lucey, Spellman, Ritter, Waters, and Hallinan who had already taken strong stands against segregation. In their cases, as presumably in others, the answer must lie in their view as to what was appropriate material for a Council.

Finally, given the immense commitment which the U.S. Bishops had made to the construction of the system of Catholic schools, the controversy over governmental aid, and the controversy caused by John Tracy Ellis' 1956 article, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life, it is surprising that only 15 bishops (10.1%) mention *Catholic education*, that only three of them refer to the question of the Church's rights in the area, and that higher education occurs in only four texts, only one of which seems to echo Ellis' concerns.

There is a common view that the U.S. Bishops went to the Council in 1962 quite unprepared for and surprised by what happened. Perhaps it is necessary to nuance that judgement in the light of their proposals for the Council. There is only one reply to Rome which appears to question the need for the Council to consider any changes in discipline or in the formulation of doctrine. Some bishops, it is true, thought only of tinkering with contemporary attitudes, activity, or institutions. But an impressive number were willing to propose more extensive changes, if not in doctrine, at least in the way it is presented, if not in the Church's fundamental constitution, at least in the way it functions pastorally. If none of the bishops was a revolutionary, a good number could be considered reformists.

Between 1960, when the last of the proposals was sent to Rome, and 1962, when the Council opened, some 43 U.S. Bishops would serve on preparatory commissions. The proposals of the worldwide episcopate were filtered to these commissions through a classical grid borrowed from the manuals of theology and the Code of Canon Law which did not always adequately represent the sorts of suggestions made nor the arguments and passions with which some of them were proposed. Most of these, and particularly the Theological Commission, were carefully controlled by Curial interests. On the eve of the Council, it was not at all certain that the initial proposals for reform had much chance of winning the day. Hans Kung's question, "Can the Council Fail?", was being asked widely.

Hence the drama of the Council's first session. Within days it became clear that a majority of the Council were in favor of real reform in the Church, and among them the U.S. Bishops, including some whose proposals of two years earlier had been very cautious. The new spirit created by the early days of Pope John's pontificate, visible already in the sudden interest of U.S. Bishops in liturgical reform and ecumenical sensitivity, was now strengthened as the Bishops of the world assumed a new and unique collegial responsibility. If the Council itself went farther and more deeply than any of the bishops had anticipated two years earlier, it cannot be said to have been a complete surprise to many of them, nor a development which, given the proper charismatic inspiration, they did not welcome and embrace.