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# The Second Vatican Council

By GEORGE A. LINDBECK

This article is reprinted from the October 1, 1962, issue of *Christianity and Crisis: a Christian Journal of Opinion*, 537 West 121 St., New York 27, N. Y. (\$5 a year). George A. Lindbeck, a lay theologian of the Lutheran Church in America, is on leave of absence from Yale Divinity School to be Delegated Observer from the Lutheran World Federation to the Second Vatican Council. With the first session of Vatican II at an end, Dr. Lindbeck's article emerges as one of the most perceptive forecasts to have appeared before the Council convened.

ON October 11 the Second Vatican Council will begin its first two-month session. A second session will follow in the spring,\* and possibly a third and a fourth. Everyone agrees on the importance of this assembly but on little else. In the words of one French Roman Catholic journal, "Opinion is divided between smug optimism and bitter, if not acid, pessimism, or at least skepticism" (*Informations catholiques internationales*, July 15, 1962, p. 17).

Most of the Protestants who try to be informed about the prospects are among the pessimists. This is natural enough. What they know about the council comes mostly from those Roman Catholics who are inclined to be gloomy—members of the avant-garde, who hoped that the council would engage in really fundamental reforms and who now find themselves discouraged by the evidence that nothing very sensational will happen after all. It is these who talk most to Protestants, whose writings are most read by Protestants; and so, naturally, the Protestant attitude is colored by their disappointment. Yves Congar, the

\* The opening of the second session has now been postponed to September 8, 1963.

dean of French Catholic ecumenicists, reports that he has often heard Catholics say that "the council is meeting twenty-five years too soon." One hears the same lament in World Council circles.

## EXPECTATIONS, HIGH AND LOW

I am not sure that the Protestant reaction is justified. But it is easy enough to understand the Roman Catholic pessimism, for they are the ones who have really high ambitions for their church. Note, for instance, the spring issue of *Cross Currents* (mostly translated from the December 1961 issue of *Esprit*), in which there are passionate expressions of the desire that the church actualize in visible form its claims to be the humble servant of Christ and of man. It should abandon outward feudal pomp, give the Vatican museums to an international agency, abolish the Swiss Guard, accord the laity far more responsibility and power, make the finances of the church public, introduce a married clergy (even while safeguarding celibate vocations), make it easier for Socialists to combine their political Marxism with Catholic loyalty, stop baptizing, confirming and marrying those for whom these are purely social ceremonies, eliminate Latin from the liturgy and reduce it in seminary instruction. These desires are theoretically realizable, but there is not the slightest chance that any of them will be put into effect at the present time.

It is not only the extremists (remarkably numerous, especially in Europe north of the Alps) who wish for what is still impossible. Responsible and influential theo-

logians have also proposed unrealizable programs for the council. The sense of crisis is acute in many circles. The time has come when the church must abandon "the Constantinian era" (this is the theme of Archbishop Jaeger's book on the council). As spelled out by Chenu (in *Un Concile pour notre temps*, published by Cerf), this means the rejection not only of the traditional alliances between spiritual and temporal power but also of the associated religious culture as this is manifest in the emphasis on Roman legalism, on the primacy of abstract reason, on the conception of man as fundamentally a "nature," on the attempt to create "Christian" economic, social and political orders.

These characteristically Constantinian traits must be replaced by stress on preaching the Gospel, the primacy of the Word of God, the Church as mission, as service and, finally, the decisive test, that "the poor hear God's word," for it is with them above all that the church must be concerned. The same sense of urgency and an even more comprehensive program is to be found in the work of Hans Küng, author of the most widely read of all books on the council, *The Council, Reform and Reunion*, a best-seller in German, French, English and Spanish. He declares that "the council will be either the fulfillment of a great hope or else a great disappointment" (p. 148 of the English edition). Clearly if this is the only choice, many will anticipate the worst.

Strategic considerations also influence what is said about the council. A kind of propaganda war is in progress. The "smugly optimistic" do everything to reassure the faithful that whatever the Pope and the bishops decide is bound to be good and

only the malicious would question its excellence. In contrast, the opposition—smaller in numbers but notably superior in ability—seems often to ask for more than it hopes in an effort to raise expectations and to put pressure on the bishops to work for at least some genuine advances. Some of the more pessimistic Protestant pronouncements seem to have a similar motivation.

Another source of gloom is the Protestant reluctance, especially widespread in the United States, to admit the possibility of real improvement in the Roman Church. Needless to say, the council will provide plenty of ammunition for its critics. Unacceptable positions will be reiterated, and even genuine advances will be disguised under traditional terminology. If, for instance, the hoped for doctrinal constitution on the status of the bishops is proclaimed, it will presumably be emphasized that this is simply a reaffirmation of what the church has always taught and that it in no way diminishes the sovereignty already accorded the Pope. Yet, if this constitution even partially reflects the thinking of many well-recognized theologians (some of whom are members of the preparatory commissions), it could contribute in the long run to profound modifications in the power structure of the church.

Still another reason for doubts about the council is the fear that the bishops as a whole will prove to be reactionary in comparison to the present Pope and the preparatory bodies. The less progressive parts of the Catholic world, such as Latin America, are numerically much more heavily represented in the full assembly than in the preparatory commissions. Any or all of the plans made so far could be

altered or rejected, and new topics may be suggested. While the Pope's consent is necessary for an item to be placed on the agenda, it would perhaps be politically (though not legally) impossible for him to veto certain kinds of proposals that he himself does not appear to favor. The strengthening of Marian doctrine or extremist denunciations of communism might be examples of this.

Thus the pattern of the First Vatican Council 92 years ago could be repeated. On that occasion the bishops approved none of the original preparatory commissions' schemata. Their major pronouncement, the dogma of papal infallibility, was first proposed from the floor (though admittedly not without papal prompting). These are theoretical possibilities, but the preparatory work for this council has been so much more intensive and extensive that it is difficult to imagine any major surprises.

#### TO SATISFY CONSERVATIVE AMBIGUITY

What then have been the results of this preparatory work? We know the subject matter but not the content of the seventy schemata that have been passed by the central commission for submission to the bishops. There is only one exception. We have been given an official description of the character of the proposed schema on religious liberty. It will treat "of the right of man to follow, even in religious matters, the demands of his own conscience . . . and of the duty [of the state] to respect this right of its citizens in practice." This sounds promising, but the report is not detailed enough to tell whether this proposal directly opposes the legal disadvantages under which non-Catholics suffer in such countries as Spain and Colombia.

That it will be at least somewhat helpful appears likely, however.

The treatment of other interconfessional issues will probably be less satisfactory. Regulations governing mixed marriages will not be greatly changed, according to Michael Schmaus, a leading German theologian. There is no evidence that the views of the more advanced ecumenicists are reflected in the drafts of the doctrinal constitution on membership in the church. Probably the positions of *Mystici Corporis* (1943) and of the letter of the Holy Office in the Feeney case (1949) will be reaffirmed. According to these, the relation of non-Catholic Christians to the church is described as if it were the same as that of heathen of good will: i. e., both are saved through an implicit, unconscious desire that establishes a salvific relation—but in no sense membership—to the one true church.

Some Roman Catholics argue that this mode of analysis radically underestimates the importance of Christian baptism and of other means of grace found in non-Catholic Christian communities. However, the most that apparently can be hoped for is that the proposals will not exclude these more ecumenical views and will leave open the possibility of their further development. As we shall see, real advances can be anticipated in the practical ecumenical stance of the church but apparently not in doctrine.

The outlook in regard to a number of other doctrinal matters is similar. One of the keenest of contemporary Roman Catholic theologians, Karl Rahner (who was too important to keep out of the preparatory work entirely, but was sidetracked by being placed on the commission for dis-

cipline), would like to see the council do as little as possible in the theological realm. He feels that, on the one hand, it is a bad business to make doctrinal pronouncements unless there is a real need for them, as when threatened by open and dangerous heresy. On the other hand, he thinks that the issues on which the council is likely to pronounce haven't been sufficiently worked over by the theologians to make really adequate formulations possible.

The kinds of things that he feels should be avoided have apparently all been placed on the agenda. They are psychoanalysis, various existentialist views, the ultimate destiny of unbaptized children dying in infancy (is it the beatific vision or the *limbus infantum*?) and monogenism (viz., the view that Adam and Eve represent an actual couple from whom all human beings are descended). This last problem is obviously closely related to the question of whether original sin and its transmission are to be understood in objective historical or in more existentialist terms.

All of these subjects are now being debated by Roman Catholic theologians, and Rahner is obviously worried that the council will throttle discussion by obscurantist affirmations of traditional formulae. It is not certain that this will occur, but probably the most that can be hoped for under present circumstances is that the formulations will be sufficiently ambiguous to satisfy the conservatives and at the same time not stop the movement of theological thought.

Similar comments apply to the treatment of moral problems. What is to be proposed appears to be a kind of summary of the warnings, prohibitions and condemnations issued by the Holy Office and

in encyclicals since World War II. Starting as usual from natural law, all forms of moral relativism will be attacked and the traditional teaching on sex and marriage reasserted. To this the influential German Catholic news magazine *Herder-Korrespondenz* objects that "the faithful are not awaiting complaints from the council over the decay of morals nor a catalog of prohibitions but concrete instruction on the way to Christian perfection in the manner of Holy Scripture" (March, 1962, p. 276).

#### BISHOPS, SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

Non-Catholics have probably written more on the doctrine of the episcopacy than on any of the other anticipated topics. The supremacy accorded the Pope at the First Vatican Council will probably, as I have already indicated, be partially balanced by a re-emphasis on the episcopal office. This will be an advance in the sense that it will redress the papal extremism of the last 90 years. However, it will probably not go beyond what would actually have been affirmed by the First Council if it had not been prematurely adjourned. An effort will be made to give practical application to these doctrinal pronouncements by starting a process of decentralization that will lead to greater autonomy for the various regions. When, for instance, the French or German bishops are ready for a change, they will be able to go ahead with less dependence on Rome than formerly. This is fine for Germany or France but perhaps not so good for those areas of the world where the bishops are behind, rather than ahead, of Rome.

Anyone who knows the extraordinary effects that the biblical movement is hav-

ing in some sectors of the Roman Church will probably be more interested in what the council does with "Scripture and tradition" than with any other topic. A group of Catholic theologians, of whom the best known are Josef R. Geiselmann in Germany and George Tavard in the United States, wishes to assert strongly the primacy of Scripture for both theology and piety, and to make clear that tradition is fundamentally interpretive, rather than an independent channel of information about the revelation "given once and for all to the saints."

This would, of course, be done in such a way that no dogmas now in existence would be jeopardized, and the present possibilities of proclaiming additional dogmas would theoretically remain the same. Yet it would not be the hollow victory that Protestants are likely to assume. When a particular point receives conciliar approbation in the Catholic Church, its power to mold life and thought is greatly enhanced. Protestants may think that the more evangelical Roman theologians give a very inadequate primacy to the Bible, but the fact remains that they accord it a far more significant place than did post-Tridentine theology. If their views receive even partial conciliar recognition, the present biblical movement will be greatly strengthened. The result might be that the whole shape of Catholic life and thought would eventually be recast along the theocentric lines of the newer liturgical movement, which subordinates the cults of Mary and the saints to Christ and has no taste for casuistic legalism.

I am not going to say much about possible liturgical reforms. In general we can expect the advances of recent decades to

be consolidated and to be urged more strongly on the liturgically backward parts of the world. The one sensation on the list of possibilities is communion in both kinds (bread and wine) for the laity, probably confined to special festivals.

It is beyond the limits of one article to discuss the schemata presented by the other commissions. It is possible that some of their proposals will greatly affect the future of the church, but at the same time there is no reason to think that anything obviously spectacular is being planned.

#### A MODERATE OPTIMISM

The picture that emerges from this piecemeal consideration of the preparatory work is mixed. It is easy enough to understand the disappointment of many Catholics and non-Catholics. And yet it seems to me that a comprehensive judgment on the prospects for the council must be moderately optimistic. The mere fact that it has been convoked, quite apart from anything that it will do, is encouraging. The extreme papists have been routed. They can no longer claim that the infallibility of the Pope and his direct jurisdiction over all the faithful eliminate the need or place for conciliar action. Already a vigorous discussion has been started as to how to understand the status and the need for general councils, and how to accord them sufficient authority to justify their occurrence without contradicting the dogmas regarding the powers of the Pope.

Equally significant is the tremendous upsurge of discussion and action, lay and clerical, generated by the calling of the council. Even before it has taken place, the council has caused more soul-searching, more open self-criticism, more adventure-

someness than Catholicism has known in modern times. Because the council provides an institutionalized way of channeling this ferment, its effect has already been vitalizing rather than disruptive.

Furthermore, everyone knows that there has been a revolutionary change in the ecumenical atmosphere. In part this has resulted from John XXIII's insistence that the council's job is to reform the church in order "to make it more attractive" to non-Roman Christians; in part this has come from the establishment of the Secretariat for Christian Unity and the invitation to non-Roman churches to send observers. The ecumenical climate will no doubt be further improved by the schemata on Catholic ecumenism, the necessity of prayer for union, the Word of God as a means for union, and religious liberty. As we have already observed, no specifically doctrinal advances in the ecumenical field can be anticipated, but these practical "decrees," as they are called, are important. Words like "love," "prayer," "openness" and "dialogue" have been greatly abused, and yet the realities to which they point are really quite fundamental.

Finally, when the council is viewed in the broad sweep of history, there is every reason to believe that it marks the conclusion of the Counter-Reformation epoch. For centuries Roman Catholicism has, from the Reformation perspective, been moving further and further away from its Christian foundations toward a more and more rigidly defensive authoritarianism, toward increased papal power and Roman centralism, toward greater Mariolatry. Since Leo XIII a countercurrent has intermittently flowed, leading to greater freedom in the social and political spheres and — especially

in recent decades in Europe — to theological, liturgical and biblical revivals. The coming council, if it follows the lead of the preparatory work, will be basically on the side of this renewal.

#### IMMENSE TRANSFORMING POWER

There is complete unanimity on the part of well-informed observers that no one is planning to propose new Marian dogmas, or to enhance the power of the Pope, or to engage in massive condemnations of the major reformatory forces within the church. Little that is adventurous or exciting will be done, but many of the gains that have already been tested in certain areas will be applied to the whole of Catholicism. Thus on both the negative and the positive sides it will constitute a defeat for the forces of reaction. It may well represent the watershed at which the Roman Church as a whole (and not simply the progressive portions of northern Europe) reverses the course of its movement and opens up the possibility of truly great changes in the future. Professor Skydsgaard reports these words of one Roman Catholic theologian: "Not too much is to be expected of this council. . . . The conclusive thing may not, perhaps, take place until the second, third or fourth council which will follow this one!" (*The Papal Council and the Gospel*, ed. K. E. Skydsgaard, Augsburg, 1961, p. 168.)

It is impossible for us to imagine the shape of this "conclusive thing" — of this "unity which Christ wills," to quote the favorite phrase of that saint of Catholic ecumenism, Abbé Couturier. But it would be a mistake to underestimate the immense transforming power of the quest for this goal among millions of Roman Catholic, not to mention non-Catholic, Christians.