

THE II.VATICAN COUNCIL, EASTERN EUROPE AND AUSTRIA

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My reflections on this truly fascinating matter are those of a diplomat, a historian, an eye-witness, an Austrian and a Roman Catholic believer, who spent his lifetime captivated by the fate of the Church, of Central and Eastern Europe and by the connection between religion and society in a rapidly changing world. I am a non-theologian but I think the Church has still an important and a positive role to play beyond her purely spiritual message, which is by the way a message of basic optimism and hope, as a victory over death, suffering, negation and senselessness, a message of justice and love. Good is at the end stronger than Evil. Weakness, sins and errors of Men, among them also of Church representatives cannot diminish the value of this Message.

The point is to find the right balance between an eternal message coming from God and human rules worked out during history, submitted to changing conditions. The more, it is the appropriate language of communication, adopted to our mentality that counts. Things are to be transmitted in a way understandable to people from today. The last Council, inaugurated in October 1962, was meant to open windows to introduce fresh air according to Pope John XXIII. I was twelve by then and fifteen at the end in 1965. To my parents, fervent but also liberal Catholics and to my grand-father, a history professor, the Council meant great expectations. Instead of being mainly defensive in an old struggle against attacks and temptations of modernity, and more recently in a counter-strategy to the heavy pressure from communism, the opportunity was given to opt for more openness in a spirit of respect and ecumenical dialogue with other churches, of a honest dialogue with Jews and other non-Christians (such as Muslims), of a dialogue with non-believers and with all men of good will. In the Church itself, all the People of God, clergy and believers are united in a 'common priesthood' in their Responsibility for Church and Universe. The Pope is head, but in collegiality with bishops – this being a very old subject, if we only think of conciliarism in the Middle Ages. As basic outcome of Vatican II, those are the main points I can see as an observer. The acceptance of Freedom of Religion (not just for the Catholic Church, but in general), Freedom for Research, Opinions, Arts and Politics (thus the full acceptance of Democracy as form of government), principles enshrined in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* from 1965, the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, documents like *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965) or, later on, John Paul II social encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) or *Mater et Magistra* are clearly elaborating on the ideas of Dialogue, Freedom and Responsibility. Opposition between the Bible and Natural Sciences no longer prevailed for the Church, an idea already put forward by the French theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (and initially criticized by Rome). Certainly *Humanae Vitae* (1968) rejects contraception, a subject under permanent discussion until now, but the Freedom of Conscience is applicable according to bishop conferences in several countries, something not opposed by Pope Paul VI.

Unitatis Redintegratio teaches us that 'dissenting brothers' are no longer 'heretics', in *Nostra Aetate* we learn that the Church is full of respect for the Muslims. The Church made clear that

she is against any form of discrimination. In *Nostra Aetate* we find “Reflections on Covenant and Mission” pointing out the Old Covenant with God, common to Christians and Jews. The accusation of Jews as God’s Murderers is no longer valid.

The Church liked to initiate a new special relationship with the Jews, whom the Austrian historian Friedrich Heer called “Gods first love”. The Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, in logical continuation of ideas coming from the Council, clearly rejected Antisemitism. According to Benedict XVI, the Church is compelled to tolerance, respect, friendship and peace among nations, cultures and religions: there is no theological justification of anti-Semitism (2008). Both popes visited synagogues in Rome. John Paul II visited Jerusalem, thus Israel.

Indeed, Jesus Christ in His human nature was a Jew and Paulus a Jewish preacher before accepting Christian faith.

Concerning the Orthodox Church, Patriarch Bartholomew stated that Vaticanum II created conditions for the Unity of Christians. Already in 1964 the mutual ban dating back to the Grand Schism of 1054 was lifted by Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras. In 2001, John Paul II asked for forgiveness for the sins committed by Catholics against their Orthodox Brothers.

To an observer from the outside, it seems that an ecclesiastical dialogue between Rome and Moscow although progress has been made in the last decades is still a delicate matter. The rather narrow concept of indivisible canonical territory, as seen from Moscow, and the reluctance of Russian Orthodox circles to fully accept the existence of a Uniate Church with Eastern rite but loyal to Rome as established at the Brest Union of 1596 (surely also to strengthen politically the Polish-Lithuanian realm of the time) poses certain challenges. No Catholic rite suffered as much as did the Uniates (or Greek Catholics) since the dissolution of the Union at the Lviv Synod of 1946, carried out on Stalin’s orders with the help of an obedient Russian Orthodox hierarchy. The significance was the greater as those Uniates considered themselves as being a kind of Ukrainian National Church, especially in the former Polish or Austrian parts of Western Ukraine (Eastern Galicia). The specific ecumenical mission of Eastern Catholic Churches, to build a bridge between Rome, Moscow and Constantinople, as already Metropolitan Andrej Sheptyckyj understood his theological role before World War II, and the more after the dissolution of the Soviet Empire and the reestablishment of the Union gives a particular importance to the Greek Catholics. Cardinal Lubomir Husar was acting even stronger in this spirit, following the premises of Vatican II, when he was looking for ways “Towards Post-Confessional Christianity”.

Long before the downfall of Communism one of the masterminds of Vatican II, the Austrian Cardinal Franz König, an eminent student of Eastern Churches, was essential to initiate a vivid dialogue with the Orthodox world. He established the platform *Pro Oriente*. His motto he expressed by “open to God, open to the world, Church in dialogue” and emphasized the idea of establishing contacts. At home in Austria, he succeeded in reconciling Catholics and social democrats, traditionally rather anti-clerical. He shared the views of the Belgian Jesuit

Jacques Dupuis (Towards a Christian theology of religious pluralism). He visited the USSR in an atmosphere of semi-détente under Nikita Chrushev.

Otherwise, direct talks between the Vatican and the Kremlin led to the release from a Siberian gulag of the Uniate Cardinal Josif Slipyj and, on the other hand made possible a delicate modus vivendi between Church and State in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, such as release of the Czech Cardinal Josef Beran and the nomination of bishops on vacant Hungarian dioceses. That was the result of missions by Cardinal Agostino Casaroli in Eastern Europe and a visit of Chrushev's son-in-law Adshubej to Rome. Parallelly to professional Vatican diplomacy trying to overcome the pure rejection of atheistic communism whose party addicts were automatically excommunicated since Pope Pius XII and the Church being heavily persecuted in the Stalinist era, Vienna Archbishop Cardinal König made his own "Eastern policy", all in line with the Holy See. He finally could convince the Hungarian Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty, exiled within the American Legation in Budapest to leave Hungary. In 1971, Mindszenty, the symbol of a Church unwilling to submit to repressive Communist dictatorship, came to Austria where he died in 1975, buried in Mariazell, Magna Mater Austriae et Hungariae, still critical towards the Vatican's Eastern diplomacy he considered too weak and irreconcilable towards the Kadar regime.

There were also other critics of any opening eastwards like Monseigneur Lefebvre, who condemned any dialogue with the Communists as dialogue with the Evil itself. He misunderstood what König and others did, because they never abandoned any of their principles, just aware of the fact that politics is the art of what is possible, knowing you come forwards patiently step by step and cannot choose your partners.

König had regular talks with the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski, whose Church maintained a much stronger position than the Czech or Hungarian one. The Warsaw regime had to make more concessions than in Prague or Budapest and could not, at least after 1956, persecute the Church as openly as the southern neighbours were able to do, mainly in Czechoslovakia, whereas the situation in Hungary became gradually better. Yet with time the new Vatican 'Ostpolitik' proved to be more promising than the old intransigent one prior to John XIII and the Council. In West Germany, with Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr, the "change through rapprochement" (Wandel durch Annäherung) had replaced after 1969 the former rigid Hallstein doctrine in relation with the East bringing results to the people, through agreements with the governments.

Later on, the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 had long-lasting impacts on the East-West relations and, through the so-called 'basket 3' devoted to human rights, a formidable argument for a growing political opposition and to Western governments for interventions towards the Eastern regimes. This cannot be dissociated from the situation of the Churches and believers under Communist rule.

Already in the sixties, dialogue between Catholics and Marxists was held by academicians like Leszek Kolakowski, Milan Machovec or the International Paulus-Society in Germany. It was part of a development leading to Alexander Dubcek's Prague Spring and to the March 68

movement in Poland. Even if followed by setbacks a weakening had been made undermining the Communist regimes on the long run.

When Karol Wojtyla was elected pope in October 1978, a new era started. For the Church, it was kind of a logical consequence of Vatican II, meaning a pontificate focused politically and spiritually on human rights, the freedom of conscience and social justice, a message of hope and moral strength. Mottos like “Do not be afraid” or “Living in truth” were able to enthusiasm masses of believers in Eastern Europe. Poland was the first goal as traditional stronghold of faith in the Communist world. Whoever has seen the first visit of Pope John Paul II to his homeland in 1979, as I could do as an eyewitness working by then for the ORF Austrian TV team which covered the whole journey will never forget this incredible experience. Priceless background informations were regularly provided to me by Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, a leading Catholic intellectual who became much later twice Foreign Minister of free Poland, a hero of unbroken civil resistance to communist dictatorship and author of numerous books. 1979 gave way to the free trade unions movement in 1980, led by Lech Walesa, whose “Ethics of Solidarity” got its theoretical basis thanks to a book written by Jozef Tischner, a priest from Cracow . Although Solidarity was crashed in December 1981 by a military coup d’état under General Jaruzelski, it gathered up to 10 million members and became a milestone in the final overthrow of Communism end of the eighties. Later on, Walesa as well as the German Chancellor Helmut Kohl pointed out that neither Solidarnosc nor the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany would have been possible without the important contribution of Pope John Paul II. Of course, there were several reasons coming together, economic and political to favor this development, but the moral impact of the Pope’s message may not be underestimated. Michail Gorbachov himself, the last Soviet leader, clearly admitted the role played by the Holy Father to bring about the changes in Eastern Europe, themselves hardly thinkable without glasnost and perestroika in Moscow.

John Paul understood perfectly well the essence of a greater Europe deeply rooted in ‘two lungs’, Eastern and Western, of her old Christian culture common to both (Ecclesia in Europa). Saints Cyril and Method became symbolically Patrons of Europe. To give a soul to Europe was a program for the Catholic Church as well as a noble goal to Jacques Delors, President of the European Commission . Living in Truth became a guideline to the Pope and to Vaclav Havel, who remembered the message of Thomas Masaryk, first President of Czechoslovakia, himself a moral heir of the old hussites, long time ago adversaries of the Church, now much closer thanks to basic ethic standards shared by both. Those standards , lacking in Communist reality, could unite dissidents of different origin from left to right within Charta 77, the Czech opposition initiative, where Catholics and former Communist Party members cooperated in a common will to help establish democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The priest Vaclav Maly, a disciple of Josef Zverina, is an example. The old Cardinal Frantisek Tomasek and then, after the Velvet Revolution, the theologian Tomas Halik were instrumental in reviving a Catholic intellectual life in free Czechoslovakia after 1989.

Laics like the Czech Vaclav Benda or the Slovaks Jan Carnogursky and Frantisek Miklosko played an eminent role as committed Christian opponents to communism and democratic politicians during and after the Velvet Revolution. From 1993 on, the Church in the newly

created Czech and Slovak Republics experienced a spiritual renewal going back to the lessons of Vatican II.

As an Austrian diplomat posted in Prague from 1989 to 1995, I got the unique opportunity to follow this period day-to-day as an eye-witness, thanks to good regular contacts with the personalities named above among laics and clergy. I admired their courage and deep devotion to the cause.

Dialogue is the long-lasting message of Vatican II: dialogue within the Church, ecumenical dialogue (also, which is very important, new, constructive relations with the Protestants), Christian-Jewish dialogue, Christian-Islamic dialogue, the dialogue with non-believers in preparing the future of religion in the 21st century – that is what Cardinal König left as his legacy in line with the Council. And what about Austria specifically?

Pope John Paul, who visited Austria three times between 1983 and 1998, spoke of Austria as a “mirror and model for Europe” and as a bridge among nations with multiple origins. Already back in 1952, the Mariazell Manifesto stated the aim of a free Church in a free State, leaving behind the tradition that linked historically throne and altar. The Austrian Church sees a parallelism of very conservative and very progressive tendencies. The Maria Trost Declaration of 1968 admitted the possibility of contraception up to a point as a matter of personal conscience. In 1995 the initiative We Are the Church (Wir sind Kirche) asked for more participation of the laics, the full equality of women, regulation of births, admission of divorced believers to the sacraments, the abolishment of celibate. Recently, we got a Parsons Initiative with an appeal to disobedience, stating the canonical law is lacking answers to questions of modernity. Indeed we have an insufficient priest recruitment and many people leaving the Church as an organization (the Austrians have to pay taxes for the Church/Kirchenbeitrag/ as long as they are part of it), heavy criticism for nominations of more conservative bishops, questions of sexual ethics and for cases of pedophilia. Still, the Church plays a role in public life but believers as Austrians are used to a far reaching civil society open to a democratic participation of citizens. They like to involve themselves in ecclesiastical matters. This is a good sign for a Church existing from below whose fate seems important to many in times of growing indifference and atomization of a materialistic society. On the other hand it creates problems in the coexistence between laics and hierarchy, which cannot make exceptions for this or that country on basic principles.

As in Austria, the Church was never persecuted by authorities and could always act freely, except for an awful wartime under the Nazi regime, the Church did not play a role as opposition force or symbol of national identity. Her position in that respect quite different from the one of the Polish or the Croatian Church, which are comparatively much more authoritarian. People seem to have understood the message of the Council, although certain interpretations are going quite far. They often do not accept the part of John Paul II message rejecting any form of contraception and are expecting even more “fresh air” than Pope John XXIII had promised on the eve of Vatican II. The eminent Austrian theology professor Paul Zulehner tries to seek for compromises between contradictory positions.

If we look back to fifty years since 1962, the beginning of Vatican II, we see that the Church of today is in fact very pluralistic, despite of attempts to act more strictly. There is no 'monolithic block' any longer. The variety of traditions and mentalities make the Church stronger, richer, more colourful. The Council had a long-lasting influence on the role of Church in Society, it contributed to change the map of Europe. The EU, whose pilgrim fathers after 1945 were several Christian democratic politicians in the West is 'catholic' in its immediate, transnational meaning. The spirit of the Council would weaken the Communist regimes, whose moral and intellectual emptiness and mendacity became more and more evident.

The importance of the Council lies in the attempt to better reconcile the Eternal and the Temporary in a language accessible to our contemporaries. The outcome is, as all things human, a never-ending work in progress.-----JFB

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