

V⁺2 WE TOO ARE CHURCH

VATICAN II – RENEWAL OR BETRAYAL

(Paper presented at the National Consultation, Proggaloy, Kolkata, February 2019)

chhotebhai

INTRODUCTION:

It is now 54 years since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council (Vat II). It was the 21st such ecumenical council in the 2000 year odyssey of the Catholic Church. In 1969 I obtained a copy of the Vat II documents. For several years thereafter Vat II meant little to me, as I was enamoured of the Holy Bible, and did not see the need of anything more! That was until 1980, when I attended a seminar at the National Vocation Service Centre, Pune.

I got a rude shock because several priests and religious were openly critical of the church. I made bold to question a Spanish Jesuit, Rev Peter Ribes. His reply was an eye opener; “We criticise the church because we love it”. To this day I have with me a paper presented by this Jesuit on pre and post Vat II ecclesiology. I owe him a wealth of gratitude.

THE BACKGROUND:

To get under the skin of Vat II, I will start with the man who envisaged it – Pope John XXIII, as reflected in his autobiography “Journal of a Soul”. Here are some vignettes. Less than 3 months after he was elected Pope he announced his desire for the Council. He then prayed, “Renew in our days your miracles as of a second Pentecost”. Three years later, at the opening of the council he referred to that announcement as “completely unexpected, like a flash of heavenly light”. It was not a sudden flash, but a gradual build up of what drove him. I quote some of his reminiscences after becoming Pope. “I have no longer any special ties in this life ... the whole world is my family. This sense of belonging to everyone must give character and vigour to my mind, heart and actions”. He says, “Meekness and humbleness of heart give graciousness in receiving, speaking and dealing with people”. He believes in the maxim “Know thyself” which “suffices for my spiritual serenity and keeps me on the alert”. That is why he says, “One must always be ready for the Lord’s surprise moves”! **If Pope John XXIII had not been meek, humble, open, with self-awareness, decisiveness, and equanimity, Vat II would never have seen the light of day. The lack of these very virtues would destroy his vision.**

Vat II promulgated 16 documents, collectively referred to as the Documents of the Second Vatican Council. Of these, two were Dogmatic Constitutions, one a Constitution, another one a Pastoral Constitution, nine Decrees, and three Declarations; in descending order of import. Of these the two path breaking ones are the “Dogmatic Constitution of the Church”, referred to by its Latin name *Lumen Gentium* (LG); and the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”, referred to as *Gaudium et Spes* (GS). Earlier Councils were concerned with defining doctrine or defending the faith. **Vat II was not church-centric. It was existential, addressing issues like marriage, politics, economics, trade unions, communications, non-Christian religions etc.**

To understand the Council we need to probe the circumstances that occasioned it. Europe, erstwhile Christendom, was emerging from the ravages of World War II, where “Christians” fought against each other. It broke the back of Christendom – its social fabric, family values, and belief in divine providence. The industrial revolution, scientific advancement, women’s liberation, sexual freedom and an atheistic Eastern Bloc left the churches empty, and increasingly redundant. There were the anti-Vietnam war flower people (hippies) in America, the Beatles in England, the Sorbonne University uprising in France and the Red Brigade in Italy. On its cover page, Time magazine published, “God is Dead”.

Pope John thought otherwise. He needed to re-establish the supremacy of the divine, of spiritual and moral values. **The Church needed to re-invent itself, to be relevant to the modern world. It was in this backdrop that the Council was convened, and now needs to be evaluated.**

A PARADIGM SHIFT:

I begin with the observations of that colossus among theologians, Rev Avery Dulles SJ. Speaking of LG he says, “Avoiding rigid definitions and scholastic or juridical subtleties, the Council shows a marked preference for vivid and biblical language. The mystery of the church is viewed in terms of the paradoxical union between the human and the divine. ... The orientations of LG are pastoral, Christocentric, biblical, historical and eschatological. The tone of the document is moreover strongly ecumenical ... **It explains Catholic teaching in a way that avoids giving unnecessary offence to other modes of thought and speech. ... Authority is viewed in terms of service rather than domination. In many respects the Constitution strikes a democratic note ...** The Constitution is a great document, even though, being the fruit of the Holy Spirit working in imperfect human beings, it is a stepping stone and not a

final accomplishment ... **This Constitution deserves to be called the most imposing achievement of Vat II**".

Most clergy and religious, especially the "activist" types, would have us believe that GS is far more progressive than LG. I would rather go along with Rev Dulles. Without LG, GS would have no meaning. As a lay leader, with 50 years of ecclesiastical involvement, **I aver with sorrow, and even anger, that the vision of LG has, over the years, been relegated to the dustbin of history. It is the great betrayal.** The Catholic Church, at least in India, has reverted to tried and tested ways of institutionalisation, status quoism and cultic religiosity. This is because the Indian Catholic hierarchy seems sadly lacking in those qualities of Pope John, aforementioned. I have good personal relationships with many bishops. They are "good guys". But **the good is the greatest enemy of the perfect**, the perfection to which the Lord invites us (cf Mat 5:48).

ITS VISION:

Some quotations/ observations from LG will indicate why I find it so path breaking, especially for us laity (*all emphases mine*):

"Mankind today is *joined together more closely than ever* before by social, technical and cultural bonds" (LG 1) – **a holistic approach**. The Church "becomes on earth the *initial budding forth* of that kingdom" (LG 5) – **it is a work in progress**, not a fait accompli. "In the building up of Christ's body there is a *flourishing variety* of members and functions" (LG 7) – **the emphasis has changed from uniformity to diversity**. The Church "forms one interlocked reality which is comprised of a *human and divine element*" (LG 8) – **a frank admission of human frailty**. "Many elements of sanctification and of truth *can be found outside of her visible structure*" (LG 8) – **the visible, structured, organised Catholic Church is not the sole repository of truth or grace**. "The Church, *embracing sinners in her bosom* is at the same time holy ... *like a pilgrim* in a foreign land" (LG 8) – **the Church is still a pilgrim, enroute, not yet arrived or "saved"**.

There is more. "The family is, so to speak, the *domestic church*" (LG11) – **the family is** not just a part of the church, but **a unique way of actually being church**. "The holy people of God shares also in Christ's *prophetic office*" (LG 12) – **the laity must speak out like the prophets did**. "The Church *recognises that in many ways she is linked* with those who, being baptised, are honoured with the name of Christian" (LG 15) – **ecumenism is part of our dogmatic constitution**, and not an optional extra. The next article admits that Jews, Muslims, non-Christians and even those "who have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God,

but who strive to live a good life” (LG 16) can attain salvation through God’s grace. Truly path breaking! **This negates all aggressive “missionary” activity aimed at “conversions”.**

It continues. “Those ministers who are endowed with sacred power are *servants* of the brethren” (LG 18) – oh really? With reference to bishops it says, “The ecumenical councils held through the centuries clearly attest this *collegial aspect*” (LG 22) – an assertion of the **collegiality of bishops**, with the Pope being the first among equals. “Priests *do not possess the highest degree* of the priesthood ... they are *dependent on the bishops* in the exercise of their power” (LG 28) – **tough luck for the all-powerful parish priests!**

THE LAITY:

Chapter IV, which is captioned “The Laity” reflects the church’s changed self-understanding. I will consolidate some of them. Everything that has been written so far *applies equally to the laity* (LG 30). Pastors must *recognise* the services and charismatic gifts of the laity (ibid). The laity are sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly offices of Christ (LG 31). A *secular* quality is special to the laity who engage in *temporal affairs* (ibid). The lay vocation lies in ordering temporal affairs according to the plan of God (ibid). “Pastors and the other faithful are *bound to each other by a mutual need*” (LG 32) – **this is inter-dependence, not one side calling the shots**, and telling us to go jump in the lake if we don’t like something. “The laity have Christ for their *brother* ... they also have for their *brothers* those in the sacred ministry” (ibid) – **so no calling them Father**, as Jesus himself had admonished his disciples.

It goes on to say, “Every layman should *openly reveal* to them (pastors) his needs and desires with that freedom and confidence that befits a son of God and a *brother* in Christ. An individual layman ... is permitted and even *sometimes obliged to express his opinion* on things which concern the good of the church” (LG 37). It continues. “*Let pastors recognise and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the layman in the church. Let them willingly make use of his prudent advice. Let them confidently assign duties to him in the service of the church, allowing him freedom and room for action. Further let them encourage the layman so that he may undertake tasks on his own initiative*” (ibid). Need one say more?

These are the words of the Dogmatic Constitution, not of a rebellious layman. In the light of the above I unequivocally indict the Catholic hierarchy of India for their gross dereliction of duty and their serious acts of omission in not implementing the mandate of Vat II vis-à-vis the laity. **Vat II was meant to be for the renewal of the Church.**

Our collective experience in the clerically dominated Indian church is rather one of betrayal.

THE POPES:

Pope John XXIII was a visionary. Pope Paul VI presided over the post-conciliar storm with sagacity. Pope John Paul II, in the initial years of his papacy, did follow the path of Vat II, as reflected in the Code of Canon Law and the Catechism of the Catholic Church promulgated by him. His social doctrine and affable nature endeared him to the youth. However, with age and infirmity, he too, in the latter half of his papacy, fell back more on pious devotions and canonisation of saints. He was unable to tackle the clerical paedophilia crisis that engulfed the church.

At his death I wrote to all our Indian cardinal electors not to vote for the Panzer Cardinal, who took the name of Benedict XVI. He went so far as to term dissident laypersons “betrayers like Judas”. He had earlier expressed doubts about Vat II teachings. He seemed bent on turning the clock back. But the holy Catholic Church is more than an individual. I daresay that his greatest contribution was to resign, when he found the going too hot for him.

The election of Pope Francis was the breath of fresh air that the church now needed. He has inherited the clerical abuse scandal that threatens to bog down his papacy, and detract from the structural and pastoral changes that he has initiated. He lives in a two-room guest house, eats with other inmates, uses a small car, asks clerics to cycle, to have “the smell of the sheep”, to be non-judgemental, and to abjure grandiose pastoral plans, graphics and pie charts. He wants compassion and action, not blah blah blah.

Unfortunately he is waging a lonely battle. His personal example has had little or no impact on his brother bishops, let alone the clergy and the rest of the church. As Jesus said long ago, that if they didn’t listen to the prophets, they won’t listen to one who has risen from the dead (cf Lk 16:31). To that I may well add – if we don’t listen to Jesus, as seen in the Gospel values, how can we expect the example of Pope Francis or Vat II to impact us? Is there no hope?

CHANGED SELF-UNDERSTANDING:

St Augustine had famously said “Help me know thee, help me know me”. Psychology also teaches us the importance of self-understanding, so as to really understand others. This principle applies equally to the church.

There is much more to Vat II than the laity, who cannot be treated in isolation; so we need to look afresh at the church’s changed self-

understanding. **Ecclesiologists have expressed this change in the four illustrations given below.** Earlier the church was structured like a pyramid, with the laity at the bottom. We were then presented the concentric model (a level playing field). Here again the laity were moved from the bottom to the periphery. No real progress. However, **my self-study throws up a two-tier model with collegiality and fraternity.**

The second illustration shows the aloofness of the church, “far from the madding crowd”. Churches, monasteries and mission compounds were built in secluded spots, where the world could not intrude or pollute its pristine glory. But after Vat II embraced “The joys and the hopes, the grief and the anxieties of the men of this age” (GS 1) **the church on the secluded mountaintop had to become the inserted and involved church of the busy marketplace.** This did happen in the first flush of post-conciliar enthusiasm. It has since withered away.

The third illustration is just two arrows that express more than a torrent of words. The earlier emphasis was on a ruling oligarchy, which now admits that **it has come to serve rather than to rule.**

The fourth illustration expresses the earlier authoritarian approach epitomised in the Latin saying “*Roma locuta est, causa finita est*” (Rome has spoken, the chapter is closed). There has indeed been a sea change in this area. The church now accepts that it is not the sole repository of truth. It acknowledges the “rays of truth” in other religions and it apologised to Galileo and the scientific world. It acknowledges the role of human sciences like psychology, sociology and anthropology. **It also accepts, at least in principle, that it should learn from the laity.**

LG clearly states that “temporal matters” – socio-economic and political affairs, are the sphere of the laity. Canon Law also provides for “Private Associations of Christ’s Faithful”, to collectively take the lead (Can 231-239). **Why then is the CBCI, individual bishops and parish priests so wary of collective lay leadership,** and reluctant to actively promote lay organizations like Catholic Associations and their national body the All India Catholic Union? If they have nothing to hide then they should have nothing to fear.

Nevertheless these fundamental changes resulted in four major movements – **Liberation Theology, Inculturation, Ecumenism and the Charismatic Movement.** They were powerful movements that, with the passage of time, seem to have lost their cutting edge. We are now left with mere cosmetic changes, bereft of their deeper meaning. So we have priests dressing like us laity, nuns switching to saris, genuflection

replaced by anjali hasta, and incense replaced by agarbattis. **The external symbol has overshadowed the deeper attitudinal change.**

THE PATH AHEAD:

I could have presented a highly opinionated critique of Vat II. But I opted for an objective approach, evaluating Vat II in its own words. By this yardstick I would daresay that the Catholic Church in India has fallen woefully short of the vision of Vat II. Today's hierarchy lacks the meekness and openness of Pope John XXIII, the sagacity of Pope Paul VI, the initial dynamism of Pope John Paul II, and the living example of Pope Francis. Hence **the wished for renewal ushered in by Vat II has been more a saga of betrayal.**

This should stimulate a groundswell from the bottom or the periphery. Let us not underestimate the power of the people, for Vox Populi is Vox Dei. As pilgrims we must press on regardless. It is time for Vat III, with a fair representation of duly elected and competent lay participants. Else, as already in Europe, the Catholic Church will become increasingly redundant. If we love Jesus and his Church we will not let that happen.

Recent events in Kerala, the mother church of India, to which we looked up with legitimate pride, have put it in the throes of a crisis. The recent synod of the Syro-Malabar Church has reacted by calling those who seek justice as "enemies of the church"! Such an indictment cannot be taken lying down.

It is in such a context that we felt inspired by the Holy Spirit to organize this National Consultation with the telling title "**We Too Are Church**". Indeed we are the church, the people of God. Hence it is our incumbent duty to make things happen, rather than to wait for them to happen. We must be the change. As motivational speaker Shiv Khera says, "If you are not part of the solution then you are a part of the problem". Rev Martin Luther King Jr had famously opined that it was not the harsh voices of the evil doers, but the silence of the good people that concerned him.

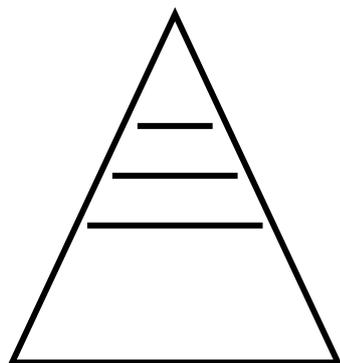
In a crisis situation silence is not an act of discretion; it is an act of cowardice. I therefore appeal to this august body of those who love Jesus and the church to speak up, to stand up and be counted. For that one needs to be adequately equipped, and beseech the Holy Spirit to enlighten and fortify us for the task ahead. I feel confident that the eminent speakers and each and every participant will contribute to this process of change, for "Hope springs eternal in the human breast".

SOME ANALOGIES:

Just as Jesus used parables, let me place before you some analogies in the context of lay empowerment and participation in the church.

- a. In a crisis situation somebody very close to me asked me to resolve the problem. My reply – How can I drive the car if you have the ignition keys and steering wheel in your hands?
- b. I asked an industrialist friend if she would tell her workers about their rights? I got a quizzical look. The worker must know his/ her rights in order to assert them. As Dr Ambedkar had said – education is empowerment. In the church context, one could say – being informed is being enlightened and then strengthened.
- c. If the scales are tipped in one direction how does one restore parity? Either by removing the excess weight from one pan, or adding to the other. Which path would we choose? Is there a third alternative?

PRE-VATICAN MODEL



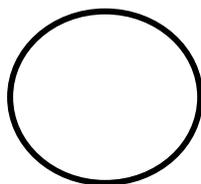
PYRAMIDICAL

Pope

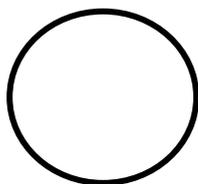
Bishops

Priests

Laity



CHURCH
(Aloof)



WORLD

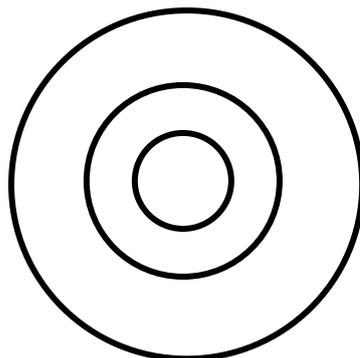


DOMINATING/ RULING



AUTHORITARIAN

POST-VATICAN MODEL



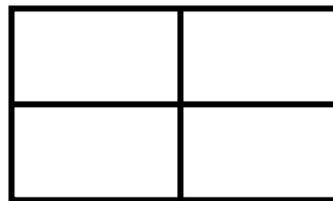
CONCENTRIC

Pope

Bishops

Priests

Laity



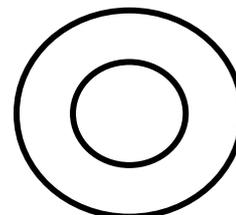
TWO-TIERED

Pope – Bishops

(Collegiality)

Priests – Laity

(Fraternity)



CHURCH
WORLD
(Inserted)



SERVING



DIALOGUING/ ENGAGING

FOOD FOR THOUGHT/ DISCUSSION

1. In the last 54 years since Vat II we may have heard $54 \times 52 = 2808$ Sunday sermons. How many of them have ever mentioned Vat II?
2. How would you rate the implementation of Vat II teachings?
Renewal % Betrayal %
3. How can we individually and collectively contribute towards the wished for renewal of the church according to Vat II?
4. 54 years is a long time in an era of instant breaking news. Is it time for Vatican III with adequate representation of competent laypersons, religious and clergy, not just bishops?