

Much Remains to Be Completed

The Unfinished Agenda of Vatican II

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WHEN PREPARATIONS were being made for the Second Vatican Council, all were warned not to raise their expectations too high. No one knew what the Council would do—the last had promulgated the dogma of papal infallibility—and some even felt that the bishops would assemble in Rome in October, rubber-stamp the Curia's proposals and be home by Christmas, their work completed.

As it turned out the bishops were far from willing to be rubber-stamps for anyone, and the Council's sessions have been marked by an extraordinary degree of free debate, open discussion and the sharp clash of opinions. At the same time an overly optimistic outlook has been tempered by the realization that a small but powerful group does not desire acts of *aggiornamento* (updating), and the closing days of the second and third sessions offered disturbing evidence that this minority was still able to impose its will upon the majority.

The unhappy *denouement* of these sessions could be justified by the fact that there would be other sessions in which to recoup the losses. This fall, however, the Council fathers meet for their final session; what is not realized now will not be realized. When one considers that the first three sessions produced only four completed items of business, and that the fall agenda includes 11 items to be acted upon, it is clear that the

fathers have their work cut out for them this year.

The schedule, however, is not quite as backbreaking as it might appear, since a number of the items are brief, and all of them have been the subject of considerable discussion at previous sessions. While there will surely be much debate on at least two documents—the statement on religious liberty and the schema on “The Church and the Modern World”—most of the other items will have been revised on the basis of suggestions made by the bishops at earlier sessions or in written interventions between the sessions. Consequently, some of the votes will be *pro forma*.

Quantitatively Small, Qualitatively Large

The Council's specific achievements thus far, though small quantitatively, are impressive qualitatively, and even their proper implementation could occupy the Roman Catholic Church for a number of decades. Many of the provisions of the first completed document, the constitution *On the Sacred Liturgy*, have already been put into effect—to the joy of many Catholics who have been eager for liturgical reform and the consternation of those few who, like the elder in a Scottish Highland kirk, made it their policy to “stan' fast against a' change.”

The most important theological statement is the constitution *On the Church*, a document establishing the principle of the “collegiality of the bishops” (the recognition that the bishops share rule in the church with

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the Bishop of Rome, the Pope), even though this principle is hedged about with a series of exceedingly cautious limitations. The constitution gives considerable attention to the place of the laity, conceives of the church as basically "the people of God," and speaks of the priesthood of all the faithful before going on to delineate the particular characteristics of the ordained clergy.

The third completed item is of great significance to the non-Catholic world, dealing as it does with the stance of the Roman Catholic Church *On Ecumenism*. Considering the negative attitude toward things ecumenical that permeated the Catholic Church even a decade ago, this decree is astonishing in its openness. It describes non-Roman Catholic groups as "churches and ecclesial communities," which, while still an equivocal expression, registers an advance over the initial version of the schema, which used only the sociological term "communities." A number of explicit acknowledgments are made that guilt for the divisions of Christendom belongs on both sides of the divide, and practical suggestions are included for continuing ecumenical activity.

The final promulgated document deals with the Eastern churches not in communion with the Roman See and opens up new avenues of cordiality in such areas as sacramental life.

Beyond these documents are 11 others, discussed at previous sessions but not yet voted on. Readers who wish more detailed information about the debates on them are referred to two excellent new books. One is written by that conciliar standby Xavier Rynne, whose *The Third Session* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$4.95) gives full summaries of the floor debates and the content of the various documents. A volume of essays by Lutheran observers at the Council has recently appeared; it not only recounts the highlights of each session but offers valuable evaluations of the promulgated documents. Edited by George Lindbeck, it is entitled *Dialogue on the Way* (Augsburg, \$4.75). Its contributors comprise one of the most distinguished rosters imaginable, including Lindbeck himself, Oscar Cullmann, Edmund Schlink, K. E. Skjoldsgaard, Warren Quianbeck and a number of others.

Romans and Non-Romans

Three of the documents awaiting promulgation have been the object of world-wide discussion and speculation, and, not unexpectedly, they are the three that impinge most directly on the relationship of the Roman Catholic Church to non-Roman Catholics. What the Council does in each case will be crucial for determining the degree to which the Church of Rome really

means to emerge from its nineteenth-century "ghetto" and confront the rest of the world, Christian and non-Christian.

One of these, a statement on non-Christian religions containing the famous "declaration on the Jews," received a preliminary vote at the third session and was considered assured of easy passage until reports out of Rome in June suggested it was again in trouble. It has been bitterly opposed by a few conservatives and others in the Council.

Catholics from Arab nations and those with reactionary theological tendencies have joined repeatedly in efforts to scuttle the document. Unless it is passed substantially as approved last November, the Council fathers will bear the onus of an implicit anti-Semitism, since the burden of the statement is to expunge from Catholic teaching the implication that the Jews are guilty of "deicide" and to ensure that anti-Semitism—which always follows in the wake of such an assertion—finds no place in the church of the future.

Fully as much attention has been focused on the statement on religious liberty. Once again, the document has had "a long and tortuous history of resistance within the Council by a handful of conservatives," but it has also undergone considerable modification at the hands of the progressives since it was originally introduced late in Session Two.

While the latest draft uses Scripture and theology to make the case for religious liberty for all men (and not just for Catholics), it also includes arguments drawn from reason and the increasingly articulated consensus that religious liberty is a desideratum for modern society. The document has been prepared in the light of the statements of the World Council of Churches on the same subject, and its passage will be a notable achievement not only in ecumenical relations but in the Catholic Church's attempt to come to terms with the rights of *all* mankind for free expression of their religious concerns—individual, corporate, private and public.

The third document awaiting promulgation is the famous Schema Thirteen, an item much debated at Session Three dealing with "The Church and the Modern World," and now considerably revised for the fourth session. Of all the Council documents, this one deals most explicitly with concerns not unique to the Catholic Church but relevant to all mankind. In discussion on the Council floor, matters that have tended in the past to be officially swept under the rug have been brought out into the open. They range from the need for the church to come to terms with modern science ("We must not have another Galileo incident," Cardinal Suenens warned the fathers), through the Christian posture on the use of nuclear weapons, to

speeches covering family planning and birth control.

Some of these items, for various reasons, do not get explicit attention in the final draft of the schema. In the latter case a papal commission on birth control is now in process of making recommendations for what will probably be a papal encyclical on the subject to be issued after the Council is over. Another matter, the vexing problem of restrictions on mixed marriages, has also been remanded to the Pope, and the burden of conciliar discussion suggests that there may be helpful modifications in this area announced in a papal *motu proprio* in the near future.

Internal Reform

The eight remaining items are chiefly concerned with internal reform. They have not attracted as much outside attention as the above documents, but a number of them are just as crucial for the church's future. Internal reform, after all, is not simply an end in itself, but makes an impact on those outside the church as well.

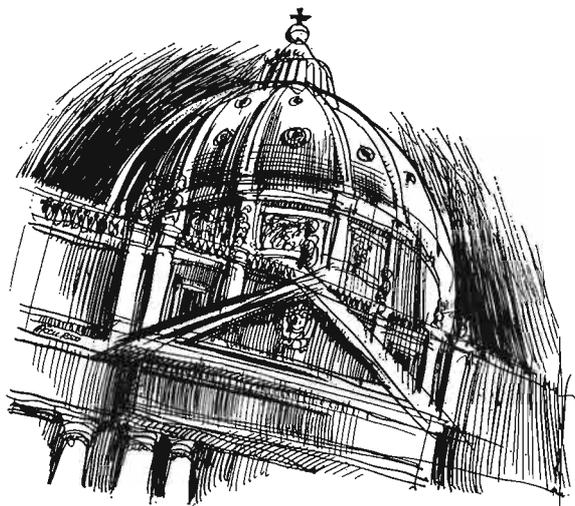
The document on missions is a good case in point. The material presented at the third session was roundly, even harshly, criticized and returned to the commission for reworking. (It was on the occasion of this discussion that the Pope urged the fathers to adopt the statement with minor revisions, whereupon the fathers proceeded to do nothing of the sort, but to subject the document to a lengthy critique.) It has been apparent that some of the most creative voices at the Council have been those of the "missionary bishops." A conciliar document authorizing them to broaden the ecumenical ways of working with which they have been experimenting could quite literally change the face of Christendom.

Another important document deals with the lay apostolate. The laity is dealt with in the already-promulgated constitution *On the Church*, and Schema Thirteen will say much both by direction and indirection about its role. The specific treatment of the lay apostolate, therefore, must draw all of this together and offer a new and bold conception of the place of the laity in a church that has not been noted for giving it much place.

Some bishops still conceive of the laity as priests' helpers, obligated only to "obey, pray and pay," as Bishop Primeau characterized a position he then went on to attack. Thus this statement will be a good index of the degree to which the Council is willing to translate the theological conception of "the people of God" into the practicalities of lay involvement in the church and the world.

The most significant "theological" item remaining

on the agenda is the schema *On Revelation*. The fortunes of this document go back to the very first session where in its original form (entitled *On the Sources of Revelation*) it was the cause of a conciliar *impasse* until Pope John took it off the floor and appointed a new commission to rewrite it completely. The original document proposed the so-called "two sources" view of revelation: that revelation comes to



the church partly through Scripture and partly through tradition, the latter supplementing and fulfilling the incomplete insights of the former.

This view has been under attack in Catholic theological circles for a couple of decades, and many scholars now espouse what Father Geisemann has called "the sufficiency of Scripture." The revised document lays heavy stress on Scripture as the source of revelation and does not define the relationship of tradition to it in too binding a way. The value of the document will be (a) that it does not "freeze" a conservative position now much under attack, and (b) that it will leave considerable room for more research in this area.

Perhaps most important for the structural life of the church in the future is the schema dealing with the governing of dioceses. The whole issue of how far the Council is prepared to push the notion of collegiality will receive its acid test here. The principle could remain a dead letter or it could be given exciting implementation if moves for "decentralization," so much mooted in the halls of St. Peter's, are really proposed. As Lindbeck forecasts, "It will almost certainly contain proposals for the reform of the Curia, for a bishops' senate and for strengthening episcopal conferences." (p. 96) Final action on these matters will rest with the Pope, so it must be hoped that the bishops will express their desires with all possible urgency.

Four other items remain. The statements on Chris-

tian education and on the "religious" life (i.e. of those in orders) do not, according to most reports, contain anything very startling. But there are also two documents dealing with the priesthood, and one of these, concerned with seminary education, could have an important impact.

Treatment of the latter subject is apparently not very specific, but it opens certain doors to seminary reform that can be (in the best sense of the word) exploited by bishops and rectors who choose to do so. This writer feels that too little attention has been given to seminary education at the Council. Even in this era of "the emerging laity" the impact of a priest upon a parish is bound to be strong, and the roots of reform must be nourished in the soil of the seminaries if the spirit of the Council is to survive in more than history books.

In too many areas of the world the diocesan seminaries are the bastions of conservatism and of methods of teaching that have not yet come to terms with conciliar reform. It must be hoped, therefore, that seminary education will receive more than cursory attention.

When the Council adjourns, its work has just begun

in one sense. For after all the public attention and interest has passed, it will be tragically easy for the Council's documents to fall, as did one of Hume's early writings, "stillborn from the press." Documents by themselves carry no assurance of renewal, but they bear the possibilities of renewal. Thus the methods adopted for their implementation will be crucially important.

Not only Protestants, but many Catholics as well, hope particularly for the establishment of an episcopal senate in Rome, a group of bishops in permanent residence to work with the Pope in implementing the Council's proposals. The Pope cannot be expected to do this by himself, or only with the assistance of an Italian-dominated Curia. Reform of the Curia, along with the establishment of the episcopal senate, ranks therefore as one of the crucial needs of the church after adjournment.

"Reform of the Curia," however, has been a familiar cry since before the Reformation, and the fact that it is being voiced now, even by the Pope, is no assurance that it will soon come to pass. But without it, the gains of the Council will be exceedingly difficult to transfer from paper into flesh-and-blood actuality.