

NOTES

TOWARDS A FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF VATICAN II

If I am going to discuss here a fundamental theological interpretation of the Second Vatican Council, it will be helpful to make some preparatory remarks before turning to the theme itself. In speaking of a fundamental interpretation, I will mean one that is not imposed on the Council from outside but is rather suggested by the Council itself, so that fundamental nature and fundamental interpretation in this case will mean the same thing. The presupposition for this fundamental interpretation is, of course, the conviction that despite all the historical contingencies which also accrue to such an event, the Council was not simply an arbitrary accumulation of individual events and decisions. No, there was an inner, essential connection among its individual occurrences; they were not interrelated simply by the formally juridical character of a council. In this respect, it is ultimately unimportant how clearly and thoroughly this fundamental conception of the Council was present or not in the explicit consciousness of its organizers. The meaning and nature of events that have genuinely existential significance in the life of any human being always include more than the person objectifies and strives for in explicit consciousness. And this holds true, above all, for significant events in the history of the Church, which are directed in a special and singular way by the Spirit of the Church. If we look at the explicit intentions of John XXIII with respect to the Council, we cannot say much more than this: even after Vatican I with its "papalism," the Pope thought a council would be meaningful and opportune, and he wanted a "pastoral" council. But this by no means rules out the possibility of a fundamental theological conception that is deeper and more comprehensive.

I am seeking a fundamental theological interpretation, because, although I cannot discuss in any detail how theology and Church history are related, it is my opinion that Church history differs specifically from secular history: its precise goal is to describe the *history* of the Church's *essence*. In a relation of reciprocal interdependence, the Church's essence both supplies the hermeneutical principle for its history and, since it is essence in history, reveals itself through that history.

Difficult though it be and perhaps only partially successful, still let me

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try to formulate in advance the basic idea with which our question is concerned, so that we do not lose sight of the connection among the individual observations and considerations that follow. I say: the Second Vatican Council is, in a rudimentary form still groping for identity, the Church's first official self-actualization *as* a world Church. This thesis may seem exaggerated; surely it needs further precision and clarification to sound acceptable. It is, of course, already open to misunderstanding, inasmuch as the Church was always a world Church "in potency" and that potency could only be actualized in the course of an extensive historical process whose origins go back to the beginning of European colonialism and the modern world-mission of the Church in the sixteenth century. Even today that actualization is not yet at its term. But one can consider the official activity of the Church in a macroscopic way and see clearly that despite the implied contradiction to its essence, the actual concrete activity of the Church in its relation to the world outside of Europe was in fact (if you will pardon the expression) the activity of an export firm which exported a European religion as a commodity it did not really want to change but sent throughout the world together with the rest of the culture and civilization it considered superior. In this light it does appear meaningful and justified to consider Vatican II as the first major official event in which the Church actualized itself precisely as a *world Church*. Of course, the event had antecedents such as the ordination of indigenous bishops (although this occurred extensively only in our century) or the withdrawal of European mission practices which had been cemented by Rome in the Rites Controversy in the East. Such antecedents should not be glossed over, nor their importance minimalized, but one must notice that they did not really have any such consequences for the European and North American Church as we begin to recognize at Vatican II. And for that reason they were really only antecedents of what we observe in Vatican II, even if only in an initial and tentative way, often overlaid by the earlier style of the European Church: a world Church as such begins to act through the reciprocal influence exercised by all its components.

This most general thesis on the fundamental understanding of Vatican II, as I have said, does not deny that the actualization of the essence of the Church as a world Church at this Council made its appearance only initially and diffidently. The existence of contrary tendencies should not be concealed. In the next few years, for example, will the new Code of Canon Law being prepared in Rome avoid the danger of being once again a Western Code that is imposed on the world Church in Latin America, Asia, and Africa? Do not the Roman Congregations still have the mentality of a centralized bureaucracy which thinks it knows best what serves the kingdom of God and the salvation of souls throughout the world, and

in such decisions takes the mentality of Rome or Italy in a frighteningly naive way as a self-evident standard? Admittedly, such questions about the de-Europeanizing of the Church raise theoretical problems which are anything but clear. Must the marital morality of the Masais in East Africa simply reproduce the morality of Western Christianity, or could a chieftain there, even if he is a Christian, live in the style of the patriarch Abraham? Must the Eucharist even in Alaska be celebrated with grape wine? Theoretical questions like these imply, more often than not, theoretical hindrances to the actualization of the world Church as such. Along with many other reasons, they help us to understand that the full official actualization of the world Church began to appear at Vatican II in a relatively initial and diffident way. At Mass before the individual sessions, when the different rites of the Church were presented, one still could not see any African dances.

Finally, while the Church must be inculturated throughout the world if it is to be a world Church, nevertheless we cannot overlook the fact that the individual cultures themselves are today involved in a process of change to a degree and at a rate previously unknown. As a result, it is not easy to say what content bearing importantly on the future the individual cultures can offer for a Church that is meant to become a world Church in the full sense. Whatever we may say about these and many other questions, it is incontestable that at Vatican II the Church appeared for the first time as a world Church in a fully official way. In what follows let me first offer a broad demonstration of this thesis, then apply it to the question of epochs in Church history, and finally consider some of its more concrete implications.

BROAD DEMONSTRATION OF THE THESIS

First, the Council was for the first time formally a Council precisely of the world Church. One need only compare it with Vatican I to see that this Council was a new event in a formally juridical way. Of course, there were representatives of Asian or African episcopal sees at Vatican I. But they were missionary bishops of European or North American origin. At that time there was not yet an indigenous episcopate throughout the world. But this is what appeared at Vatican II. Perhaps not at all in proportion to the representation of the Western episcopate. But it *was* there. These bishops did not come to Rome as individual, modest visitors who had accounts to render and alms to bring home. At Vatican II we have for the first time a gathering of the world episcopate not as an advisory body for the pope but rather with him and under him the final teaching and decision-making body in the Church. For the first time a world-wide Council with a world-wide episcopate came into existence and functioned independently. In point of fact, the importance of the non-

western part of the total episcopate may still have been relatively modest. The repercussions of the conciliar process on the extraconciliar life of the Church may still be very limited, as the subsequent synods of bishops in Rome show. But this does not alter the fact that at the Council a Church appeared and became active that was no longer the Church of the West with its American spheres of influence and its export to Asia and Africa. Under the appearance of an obvious and gradual development, something like a qualitative leap took place here, even though this world Church's new essence is masked to a considerable extent not only potentially but actually by characteristics of the old Western Church.

The leap to a world Church can be further clarified by looking at the decrees of this Council. As for the use of the vernacular, the Council's Decree on the Liturgy may already be dated; but without it and without the Council the victory of the vernacular would be unthinkable. In secular terms, Latin had been the common cultural language for Western civilization, and for that reason it had been and with some procrastination remained the liturgical language of the Western Church. But Latin could not become the liturgical language of a world Church, since it was the language of a small and particular cultural region. The victory of the vernacular in the Church's liturgy signals unmistakably the coming-to-be of a world Church whose individual churches exist with a certain independence in their respective cultural spheres, inculturated, and no longer a European export. It also signals, of course, the new problems of a world Church whose non-European local churches, for all their relationship to Rome, may no longer be ruled from Europe and its mentality.

In *Gaudium et spes*, in an action of the entire Church as such, the Church as a totality becomes conscious of its responsibility for the dawning history of humanity. Much of the Constitution may be conceived in a European way, as far as details go, but the Third World is truly present as part of the Church and as object of its responsibility. The sensitization of the European Church to its world responsibility may move ahead only with painstaking slowness. But this responsibility, our political theology, can no longer be excluded from the consciousness of a world Church.

As far as the doctrinal decrees of the Council are concerned, those namely on the Church and divine revelation, it may be that they speak largely from a specifically European horizon of understanding and that they consider problems that are vital only for a European theology. And still we can say that these decrees strive for statements that are not entirely conditioned by the linguistic style of a Neo-Scholastic theology and can be made more easily understandable in the entire world. To make this clearer, we would have to compare these texts with the corresponding late Neo-Scholastic schemata that were prepared in Rome

before the Council. One can also indicate that the Council's teaching on the whole episcopate and its function in the Church as well as on the significance of regional particular churches makes or clarifies doctrinal presuppositions which are fundamental for the self-understanding of the Church as world Church. It may well be that the Decree on Revelation, starting as it does with revelation in the Old Testament alone, with "Abraham," does not exactly propagate a concept of revelation that is easily accessible for African and Asian cultures, especially since hundreds of thousands of years between primordial revelation and Abraham remain unfilled. But we can also say that doctrinally the Council did two things which are of fundamental significance for a world-wide missionary effort. In the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, a truly positive evaluation of the great world religions is initiated for the first time in the doctrinal history of the Church. Furthermore, even from an infralapsarian perspective (as the Scholastics say), the documents on the Church, on the missions, and on the Church in the modern world proclaim a universal and effective salvific will of God which is limited only by the evil decision of human conscience and nothing else. This implies the possibility of a properly salvific revelation-faith even beyond the Christian revelatory word. As a result, in comparison with earlier theology roughly to our own time, basic presuppositions for the world mission of the world Church are fashioned which were not previously available. The Declaration on Religious Liberty can also be seen in this perspective, since for all situations throughout the world the Church expressly renounces all instruments of force for the proclamation of its faith which do not lie in the power of the gospel itself. Everyone knows how great an obstacle the ecclesial division of Christendom also constitutes for the spread of Christianity in all the world, in the so-called "mission countries." For that reason, whatever ecumenical activities the Council itself develops or approves and encourages must also be evaluated as contributions to Christianity's becoming a world religion. In short: at least in a rudimentary way the Church at this Council began doctrinally to act precisely as a world Church. Under the still widely prevalent phenotype of a European and North American Church, we begin to notice, so to speak, the genotype of a world Church.

EPOCHS IN CHURCH HISTORY

But perhaps we can grasp even more profoundly this process of a world Church coming into being. So let us consider, secondly, the question of epochs in the Church's history. In writing Church history, people have puzzled again and again over a theologically appropriate division of the material. It is indeed quite clear that dividing European history into antiquity, Middle Ages, and modernity does not give us a theologically

meaningful outline for dividing Church history. Here I am leaving aside, of course, questions about theologically appropriate subdivisions of Church history's major epochs. In addition, I am persuaded that, for history in general and especially for the history of the Church, the individual phases of chronologically measured history do not contain events of equal moment; rather, a chronologically limited time can still bear within itself a historically major epoch.

With these presuppositions, I say: theologically speaking, there are three great epochs in Church history, of which the third has only just begun and made itself observable officially at Vatican II. First, the short period of Jewish Christianity. Second, the period of the Church in a distinct cultural region, namely, that of Hellenism and of European culture and civilization. Third, the period in which the sphere of the Church's life is in fact the entire world. These three periods signify three essential and different basic situations for Christianity and its preaching. Within them, of course, there can be very important subdivisions: for example, in the second period, through the caesuras or breaks which occur with the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages and with the transition from medieval culture to European colonialism and the Enlightenment. In all this one would have to clarify the causes of these multiple and yet interrelated breaks. Nevertheless, I believe that this tripartite division of Church history is theologically correct, even if the first period was very short. This first period, Jewish Christianity, with the expanding influence which Jewish proselytism brought it, is in fact distinguished in its fundamental, characteristic, and unique quality by the fact that its human historical situation was that of the fundamental Christian salvation event, the death and resurrection of Jesus himself; this event was proclaimed *within* its *own* historical situation and not in one different from it; it was proclamation precisely in Israel and to it.

On *that* basis something like a mission to the Gentiles would indeed have been possible. Consequently, we can see that it was not theologically self-evident for Paul to inaugurate the transition from a Jewish Christianity to a Christianity of Gentiles as such. Rather, this introduced a radically new period in Church history, a Christianity that was not the export of Jewish Christianity to the Diaspora but instead a Christianity which, for all its relationship to the historical Jesus, still grew on the soil of paganism. I know that I am speaking dimly and darkly. But I think the difficulty derives ultimately from the theological problems involved in this transition from Jewish to Gentile Christianity, problems that are by no means so simple as people think, theologically difficult problems still to be worked out correctly; it is not yet reflectively clear to us what Paul "brought about" when he declared circumcision and everything connected with it superfluous for non-Jews (and perhaps only for them).

However that may be, if we want to make, in fundamental fashion, a more precise and authentically theological division of previous Church history, then the proposed triple division seems to me the only correct one. This means that in the history of Christianity the transition of Christianity from one historical and theological situation to an essentially new one did happen *once*, and that now in the transition from a Christianity of Europe (with its American annexes) to a fully world religion it is starting to happen for a second time. Of course, one can dare to make this assertion only if one considers that the transition from the ancient Gentile Christianity in the Mediterranean area to the medieval and modern Christianity in Europe is theologically less decisive than both the breaks with which we are here concerned. But that seems entirely justified, considering the unity of the Roman-Hellenistic Mediterranean culture and its transmission to the Germanic peoples—although I cannot show this in more detail here and now.

If what I have said is more or less correct, a twofold theological question arises: In what more precisely does the theological and not only the cultural historical character of such a transition, such a caesura or break, consist? And what results if we apply the theology of this transition to the one in which we are living today, a transition for which Vatican II implies something like an ecclesiastically official beginning?

As for the first question, we can start by saying at least that it concerns an event of importance not only for the history of culture but for theology and the history of salvation. This seems to me to be evident in Paul. He proclaims abolition of circumcision for Gentile Christianity, an abolition which Jesus certainly did not anticipate and which can scarcely be cogently derived from Jesus' own explicit preaching or from the preaching about the salvific meaning of his death and resurrection. And yet for Paul this principle belongs to his gospel and means revelation in some sense. It is the interruption of a salvation-history continuity which a human being cannot undertake on personal authority alone. Thus the properly theological question arises which Paul himself did not adequately pursue: What can still remain and must still remain from the Old Testament salvation history and from the Church, if circumcision could be done away with, one of the realities that pertained to the final substance of salvation existence for a Jew of that time, something that according to Paul could and in fact should have remained for the Jewish Christians of the time? This transition, for him, constitutes a genuine caesura or break. We must furthermore consider that many other abolitions and interruptions of continuity in the history of salvation were connected with this change: abolishing the Sabbath, moving the Church's center from Jerusalem to Rome, far-reaching modifications in moral doctrine, the rise and acceptance of new canonical writings, and so forth. And for the moment

it does not concern me whether these turning points can be referred to Jesus or explicitly to Paul or happened somehow and somewhere in the apostolic age. Today, as a matter of fact, perhaps even in contrast to patristic and medieval theology, we do not have a clear, reflective theology of this break, this new beginning of Christianity with Paul as its inaugurator; perhaps that will only gradually be worked out in a dialogue with the Synagogue of today. And so I hope no one will hold it against me if I cannot say anything beyond the suggestions already given. And yet I would still venture the thesis that today we are experiencing a break such as occurred only once before, that is, in the transition from Jewish to Gentile Christianity.

Can one venture this thesis and through it determine the meaning of Vatican II in the sense that there the Church, even if only initially and unclearly, proclaimed the transition of the Western Church to a world Church in a way that had previously happened only once, when the Church changed from a Church of the Jews to a Church of the Gentiles? To repeat: I think one can and should answer this question affirmatively. Of course, this cannot mean that in content these two caesuras and transitions are simply the same. No historical event occurs twice. Nor would I contradict someone who is convinced that the break inaugurated by Paul also had characteristics of a formally theological nature which are not repeated, so that the transition to a world Church is really not comparable in every respect with the transition from the Christianity of the Jewish Jesus to the Christianity of Paul. I also do not doubt that such transitions happen for the most part and in the final analysis unreflectively; they are not first planned out theologically and then put into effect, but are unreflectively realized through a finally hidden instinct of the Spirit and of grace that remains mysterious—even though the element of reflection borne along with the action should certainly not be disregarded or considered superfluous. But with these provisos I would want to affirm and defend the thesis I proposed.

Next I venture to affirm that the difference between the historical situation of Jewish Christianity and the situation into which Paul transplanted Christianity as a radically new creation is not greater than the difference between Western culture and the contemporary cultures of all Asia and Africa into which Christianity must inculturate itself if it is now to be, as it has begun to be, genuinely a world Church. Today's difference may to some extent be hidden, inasmuch as a leveling layer of rational-industrial culture from Europe and the United States lies over these other cultures, so that the difference between our culture and the other cultures is veiled, and one might expect Christianity still to be well received throughout the world as a Western export ware wherever it coincided with the dubious blessings of the West. Antiquity did indeed

have an analogue for this, namely, the Diaspora of the Jews with their proselytizing across the ancient world, on which foundation a Jewish Christianity apparently could also have been exported to that world. But, prescindng from some minor exceptions, modern missionary history shows that Christianity as a Western export actually succeeded neither with the high cultures of the East nor in the world of Islam, precisely because it was Western Christianity and sought in that way to establish itself in the rest of the world, without risking a really new beginning or breaking with many continuities that seem self-evident to us. This showed in the different rites controversies; in the export of Latin as a liturgical language to countries in which Latin was never a historical reality; in the unquestioning way that Western, Roman law was exported through canon law; in the naive, unquestioning way that an effort was made to impose the bourgeois morality of the West in all its detail on people of different cultures; in the rejection of religious experiences of other cultures, and so forth. This, then, is the issue: either the Church sees and recognizes these essential differences of other cultures for which she should become a world Church and with a Pauline boldness draws the necessary consequences from this recognition, or she remains a Western Church and so in the final analysis betrays the meaning of Vatican II.

SOME FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

Thirdly and finally, if such a claim is made for the meaning of Vatican II, what are its further implications, somewhat more concretely? It is a third question, of course. First of all, because in material terms the second break, towards a world Church, naturally has or must acquire a completely different content than the first break, towards the Gentile Church of antiquity and the Middle Ages. Then secondly, because it is an open and unclarified question whether and to what extent the Church in the postapostolic age still has the creative powers and authority that she had in the period of her first becoming, the apostolic age. At that time, in making irreversible or seemingly irreversible basic decisions which first concretely constituted her essence, she claimed such authority over and above what came to her directly from Jesus, now the Risen One. The open question is whether, during such historical breaks as the second one we are discussing, the Church can legitimately perceive possibilities of which she never made use during her second major epoch because those possibilities would have been meaningless in that epoch and consequently illegitimate. Thirdly, because despite all modern futurology, no one can correctly predict the secular future to which the Church must do justice in the new interpretation of her faith and of her essence as world Church. To that extent, of course, Vatican II is only a very abstract and formal model of the task the Church as world Church is meeting. But let us still

try to say something about the image of the Church as world Church, about the task that is still to be addressed. This, I think, pertains to the theme we are considering, because a theological interpretation of the fundamental nature of Vatican II must in the last analysis be undertaken from its final cause, namely, from the Church's future, to which this Council committed itself.

First, there is the Christian proclamation. None of us can say exactly how, with what conceptuality, under what new aspects the old message of Christianity must in the future be proclaimed in Asia, in Africa, in the regions of Islam, perhaps also in South America, if this message is really to be present everywhere in the world. The people in these other cultural situations must themselves gradually discover this—and here, of course, it cannot remain a question of formally declaring the necessity of such other proclamations, nor simply of deriving them from an inherently problematic analysis of the special character of these peoples. For this task, whose solution is not yet at hand and which does not really belong to us Europeans, it will be necessary to appeal to the hierarchy of truths of which the Council spoke and to return to the final and fundamental substance of the Christian message, in order to formulate from it anew the whole of ecclesial faith with the natural creativity that corresponds to the actual historical situation. This reduction or return to the final and fundamental substance as the first step towards a new expression of the whole content of faith is not easy. In the course of it we will have to take account of efforts made in recent years to discover basic formulas of faith. But we will also have to ask a question which has scarcely been addressed: Is there a formal criterion for deciding what really can and what really cannot belong primordially to a supernatural revelation in the strict sense? If this task were fulfilled, we would have a pluralism of proclamations, in fact the authentic pluralism, which is much more meaningful than a pluralism of proclamations and theologies within the Western Church. Since all human beings can in principle speak with one another and make themselves understood, these different proclamations would not be simply disparate realities. They could criticize and enrich one another. But each of them would still constitute a historical individuality, which would be ultimately incommensurable with every other.

A further question arises: How can a unity of faith be maintained and verified when you have plural proclamations, and how can the highest ecclesial body in Rome work for this, since the task is apparently entirely different from what the Roman authorities on faith have previously assumed within a common Western horizon of understanding? It is also self-evident that a significant pluralism with respect to canon law (and other ecclesial praxis as well) must be developed in the great local churches—even apart from the fact that genuine progress towards ecu-

menical unity cannot otherwise be expected. Quite often it has been observed that a similar pluralism of liturgies is needed, one that cannot consist merely in the use of different vernaculars. Granted, these are all formal, abstract statements which are scarcely expressive of the concrete form which the future world Church will take. But can more be said?

Let me also draw attention to a characteristic of Vatican II that I have discussed elsewhere and cannot pursue here. At least in *Gaudium et spes* the Council unreflectively used a mode of expression that has the character neither of a permanently valid dogmatic teaching nor of a canonical regulation, but must rather be understood as the expression of "pastoral instructions" (*Weisungen*) or appeals.¹ (This requires a theological treatment of official Church statements, a treatment which is not at all explicit now, since we have previously been familiar only with *doctrinal* statements and official Church *regulations* and orders.) Does this other sort of statement have more urgent significance for the future? Under what assumptions can such instructions be made effective? Once again I cannot go into these questions here, although from another perspective they would help to answer our question about the theological uniqueness of this Council.

Finally, it should be explicitly said or repeated: the Council was, with and under the pope, the active subject of the highest plenary powers in the Church, in all their usage and application. This is obvious, it was explicitly taught, and it was basically not disputed by Paul VI. But how can this highest plenary authority, borne by the pope "alone" and the Council, actually exist and be able to act in two subjects at least partially different? This has not really been theoretically clarified, nor is it apparent in practice what lasting and timely significance there is in the fact that the whole college of bishops is, with and under the pope, but really *with* the pope, the highest collegial leadership body in the Church. The still timely significance of this collegial constitutional principle in the Church remained unclear into our time and once again was more repressed than not by Paul VI after the Council. Will John Paul II change anything here? In a true world Church some such change is necessary, since a world Church simply cannot be ruled with the sort of Roman centralism that was customary in the period of the Piuses.

But let me conclude. All our considerations were supposed to be concerned with how the Second Vatican Council is to be interpreted theologically. I tried to interpret it as that event of Church history in which the world Church modestly began to act as such. I tried to make clear with a few problematic considerations that the coming-to-be of a world Church precisely as such does not mean just a quantitative increase

¹ Translator's note: cf. *Theological Investigations* 10 (New York, 1973) 293-317, 330-36, 12 (New York, 1974) 242-46.

in the previous Church, but rather contains a theological break in Church history that still lacks conceptual clarity and can scarcely be compared with anything except the transition from Jewish to Gentile Christianity. This was the caesura or break which occupied Paul, although one need not think that he reflected with theological adequacy on this transition whose protagonist he was. This is all I really wanted to say. Everything else is but dimly envisaged, and developed perhaps without the necessary systematic clarity. But I did want to draw attention to problems that have scarcely been noticed in previous theology.

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