Vatican II: 40 Years Later

He Answered Papal Summons To Journalism

By GIANCARLO ZIZOLA

In 1961 Pope John XXIII called me to Rome because he wanted the eight Italian Catholic newspapers to have a journalist devoted to the ecumenical council he had convoked in 1959. In those newspapers, the practice at the time was to simply lift the religious news out of L’Osservatore Romano, the official Vatican organ, where the pope was still called “His Holiness of Our Lord,” and it was said that he “graciously received the Most Eminent and Most Reverend Cardinal” or that he “kindly pronounced from his august lips” a given speech.

I came down to Rome from my village in the Northeast, in the province of Treviso, in a small truck with my Bible, my books, my portable typewriter and my 25 years. The trip took almost all night, because the highway wasn’t yet finished. For several hours we were trapped behind an oversize slow truck, with a sign on the back warning of “powerful brakes.”

Thus forced into a kind of slow march, I had the freedom to reflect on the fact that like the truck, my church too, which I loved and still love, was also oversized and slow, and had its own “powerful brakes.” I didn’t doubt that they were necessary. But my young truck driver pointed out to me that when one tries to drive with the brakes on, they heat up and there’s the risk of a catastrophe. Thus I thought that the church, which had continued to live with its brakes on at least since the modernist crisis, was on the verge of heating up, and that Pope John had had an inspiration from heaven in offering it the possibility to change course.

In those early days there was, without doubt, an element of pragmatism about the council. John XXIII said that at the beginning of his pontificate he was besieged by bishops, each of whom put his own problems on the table and proposed reforms. His was a faith with its eyes open, as the faith of all Christians should be, and so he concluded: “Why doesn’t everyone come to Rome and we’ll talk about these things?”

Yet when I prepared the first biography of Pope John’s five years (The Utopia of Pope John, 1973), I put my hands on documents proving that for him the idea of a council had
been an intellectual fixation since he was a young priest. When he was the delegate of Pius XII in Istanbul, he asked every friend who went to Rome to bring him books on ecumenical councils, the first few of which had been held on Turkish soil. What was natural for him certainly was not, of course, for everyone. Nevertheless, he let the entire church speak.

The “spirit of the council” was not a vaguely utopian and romantic atmosphere. For myself, I can say that it touched my sense of the Christian faith in which I had been educated. Many in my generation had already struggled in Italy, in groups of Catholic Youth, against political use of the faith. Our leader, Marco Rossi, president of the strongest youth association of Italy, was forced to resign by the leaders of the church in 1954. These were the same men who had convinced Pius XII to send Giovanni Battista Montini, the future Paul VI, into exile in Milan. This blow had demoralized us deeply. It was the church that made us suffer, and it was terrible to see that it could not understand how we battled to relieve it from its chains to political power. We weren’t the only ones to ask this. Appeals for reform multiplied among us, as in many other countries. My studies in the archives of Catholicism in Italy in the 1950s revealed to me, for example, that the invocation of a reform of the church rose from cloistered monasteries, from sectors of the clergy, from the bishops themselves.

The embers smoldered under the ashes and needed only a breath to burn anew. There existed in the body of the Catholic Church currents of ideas, aspirations, problems and requests that the leaders of the time did not allow to emerge, and in fact ignored and sought to impede. Pope John had taken the initiative to blow on those ashes, pushing the church onto the path of renewal, in a world of immense transformation. This extraordinary idea of a church that “changes” moved us deeply. It not only encouraged us to remain in the faith, but also to change ourselves in the faith. I read then with passion the texts of Cardinal John Henry Newman: “To live is to change, and to be alive is to have changed often.” His toast in the Letter to the Duke of Norfolk, in which he salutes the high priesthood of conscience before that of the pope, helped me to understand that I had to work, alongside Pope John and his ideas, so that Catholics, also in Italy, might develop a more evangelical understanding of the authority of Peter.

Thus I can say that the maturation of my Christian faith and my sentire cum Ecclesia (“to think with the church”) owe much to the council. It was a grace to have been able to follow all four sessions from up close. It was also a theological school and an amazing professional adventure. I received accreditation to cover the Vatican in 1961, exactly when the Vatican turned the floor over to the universal church, to ecumenism, to dialogue with the Jews. The grand monolith gave way to research and discussion, and the reign of dogma opened itself to opinion. The object of my work changed under our eyes and made “news.”
Exiting From Uniformity

In fact, two types of Catholics were confronting each other, each seeking to understand the reasoning of the other. For those who were fixed on the church of brakes, it was a surprise: For the first time since the council of Pius IX at the end of the 19th century, the church was exiting from uniformity. It was by no means taken for granted that these two “parties” could understand each other. The one group saw in the church the deposit entrusted to it by Christ, a fixed truth in dogmatic definitions and rites, and they believed it was necessary for every generation to transmit this truth intact and unaltered to those who came after. For the other, what was truly important was the evangelization of the world and above all the poor. They were less interested in the institution as such, in dogma, in morality, than in the “good news” to carry to the peoples who had not yet received it or who had misunderstood it.

Certainly Pope John had wanted the council, and he said this with clarity, not in order to define doctrinal points or to formulate new condemnations, but precisely for offering the antique doctrine in a new language, and with a prevalently pastoral magisterium. One day, in his standing audience with the director of Civiltà Cattolica, Fr. Roberto Tucci (now a cardinal), the pope showed him one of the preparatory schemes: “This text, see, contains 14 condemnations. I counted them. Who knows how many the others have? Can we go on like this?”

But all my research has convinced me that the change in mentality in the council was initially very slow. I believe that the fathers began to truly understand the intentions of the pope only toward the end of the first session, when they put aside the preparatory schemas and accepted a new method of work.

Also the relations with the media changed. The first session was entirely secret. But I was sure that the pope would not disapprove if I broke the secrecy. In fact, beyond his Catholic newspapers, I also wrote for Il Messaggero, the principal Roman newspaper, where I systematically violated the censorship. I published the list of the conciliar commissions prepared by the curia and thus made it known that the steering groups had a plan of control of the council, both in terms of the names and the content. This revelation led to the first assertion of autonomy on the part of the council fathers.

Some bishops came to me in the afternoons and read to me their notes on the interventions that were supposed to remain secret. Also La Croix had a secret informant, who was Archbishop Jean Villot, the undersecretary of the council and the future secretary of state. It was fun to play this game of information, but without knowing it we
helped the church to exit from its fortress and to measure itself against modern liberties, above all the right to information and the principles of democracy.

Although information about the council was liberalized beginning with the second section in 1963, with the new Pope Paul VI, the difficulties were not over for those who were not content with the official truths. I had difficulties because of some articles that revealed the existence of secret maneuvers for limiting the freedom of the council on the critical points of religious liberty and the text on the Jews. In those circumstances I cannot forget the solidarity received from many colleagues, among whom was Michael Novak, who wrote a fervid tribute to the “young and highly informed Italian journalist.”

Theology School for Journalists

The most important innovation in the press office of the council was that the summaries of the debates, prepared by employees in various language groups, were accompanied by explanations from theological experts on the points under discussion, so that the briefings were transformed into an authentic theological school for the journalists of my generation. It was a dynamic theology, also moving forward. I recall well the impression made upon me by the bishop of Vittorio Veneto, Albino Luciani (the future John Paul I), a friend of the family, when I went to see him in his room at an institute of sisters in Rome. He spent the afternoons studying, he said to me, because “everything I learned at the Gregorian is useless now. I have to become a student again. Fortunately I have an African bishop as a neighbor in the bleachers in the council hall, who gives me the texts of the experts of the German bishops. That way I can better prepare myself.”

The bishops studied, but we journalists also had to become students of theology. It is a bit of good fortune that Vatican correspondents who came after us have not had, and it seems to me that the Vatican doesn’t do enough to try to reduce this cultural difference.

I would like to conclude by saying that the council was a decisive moment, but it must have a development, a future. It unfolded in Western Catholic culture, but that culture no longer dominates society. History shows that councils have had their effect, if not slowly, at least over a long period of time, with difficult phases of reception, and also with rejections. The case of Vatican II is unique: It was followed by a mutation in society, the events of 1968, without historic precedent, at least in terms of radicality, rapidity and universality. This anthropological turn has already displaced the language and the philosophical categories in which the council expressed itself.

We therefore have to ask if the council can still “speak” to the church, or if there’s need of a new excavation in the deep. In certain areas the process of renewal launched by the
council has gone beyond expectations: for example, in dialogue with the Jews, religious liberty, peace, inter-religious dialogue. The development undertaken by John Paul II of a self-critical consciousness in the church, especially his mea culpa during the Jubilee Year is in the best spirit of the council. But this has not been enough to defeat the old temptation of the church to make itself powerful in the midst of the world.

Also on other fronts, it must be recognized that powerful groups have succeeded in holding in check the hope of a church of communion, with a collegial government, a deliberative synod, a proactive laity, a reform of the papacy, greater faith in the local churches and decentralization, and a coherent effort to exit from a Western monoculturalization of the faith in order to meet the Asian and African cultures.

This lack of reform is what renders the movement of the church once again heavy and slow. The pope tours the world in an airplane, but the church is again traveling with its brakes on.

Meanwhile the incenses of the media threaten to wrap the church in a speculative cloud, where the realities of the crisis of faith are easily ignored, precisely in the hour in which globalization offers the best opportunity in history for reviving the operation of St. Paul: that is, to exit from the shell of the West to meet the “new languages,” as Paul carried the first community of disciples out of the Mosaic shell.

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