

Vatican II: 60 Years On

Knock, Dec 2nd, 2022

I come from Ballaghaderreen, which is the Cathedral parish of the diocese of Achonry. It is where the bishop lives and I am just old enough to remember Bishop Fergus going off to the Second Vatican Council in October 1962, exactly sixty years ago. There was a special prayer said at Mass each Sunday for the success of the Council. Each time the bishop returned from Rome he told us something of what was happening, although most of it was beyond our ability to absorb fully. And more was happening than even he probably realised at the time.

Pope John XXIII was only pope for a little more than three months when he announced unexpectedly on January 25th, 1959 that he intended to hold an ecumenical council. There had only been twenty previous such councils in the two-thousand year history of the Church, so his announcement was big news for the Church and the world. There were then, more than three years of intense preparations for the Council before it met. Bishops, heads of religious orders, universities and seminaries around the world were canvassed for their views as to what should be discussed at this great event. It was a little like the consultations for the Synod called for by Pope Francis, except that the laity at large were not consulted. Eventually, the fruits of these consultations were processed by various offices in Rome and a set of documents was prepared for the bishops to discuss and approve when they convened in St Peter's Basilica.

It was a huge event by any standards. About 2,500 bishops from around the world assembled in Rome. Many of them brought advisors and assistants with them, so that the city was thronged with all manner of ecclesiastic of every size, shape and colour. For most of the bishops, this was their first time to be involved in such an international gathering engaged in very serious discussion about the life and future of the Church. They were exposed to stories about the life of the Church in parts of the world unfamiliar to them and they witnessed ways of celebrating Mass and other liturgies that were totally new to them. These interactions and experiences were often as important in shaping the outcome of the Council as were the documents that they studied and discussed. It helped people to realise that this is a worldwide Church not just a Roman or European Church.

Naturally, there was some apprehensiveness and fear among many bishops, especially among some of those in Rome, who regarded themselves as guardians of the Church. It was similar to the current situation where many fear the Synodal processes being encouraged by Pope Francis and who sometimes fail to engage with it or even work against it. When Pope John opened the Council he addressed those fears and negative voices that he had been hearing in his day. His words are still relevant to our times.

He said that there are people who “see only ruin and calamity in the present conditions of human society. They keep repeating that our times, if compared to past centuries, have been getting worse. And they act as if they have nothing to learn from history,

which is the teacher of life, ... We believe We must quite disagree with these prophets of doom who are always forecasting disaster, as if the end of the world were at hand.”

Pope John approached the Council with a positive attitude and great hope. He regarded this as a more effective way to address the contemporary world. Unlike any other Council in the history of the Church, this Council was not setting out to make laws or to condemn some heresy or group of people. It was an attempt by the Pope to encourage the bishops of the world to come together and see how best to share the message of the gospel in a way that the people of today could hear it and live by it.

Later in his opening address he said:

the truths contained in our ... doctrine, are one thing; the fashion in which they are expressed, ..., is another thing. This way of speaking will require a great deal of work and ... much patience: types of presentation must be introduced which are ... primarily pastoral in character.

The Council lasted four years. The bishops and their advisors took seriously what Pope John had said, that the Church's thinking and practices needed to be presented to the modern world in a way that made sense and that was appealing, without compromising anything of faith or morals that was essential. The result was that the documents that had been prepared for them over the previous few years were rejected and completely new documents were produced that took into account the development of ideas, not just in theology, but in the human and social sciences as well.

In all the Council produced 16 documents, which spoke about the Word of God, the Church, the liturgy, ecumenism, religious freedom, education, communications and other issues important to the life of the Church. These documents were interesting in terms of their style, unlike other councils which either produced legislation or condemnations, often in very severe and punitive terms. Just to give an example of severe language used by Pope Julius at Lateran V (1512) addressing the cardinals, no less, who tried to depose him: “We condemn, reject and detest, with the approval of this holy council, each and everything done by those sons of perdition”. Other councils, too, used threatening, intimidating language in order to correct errors or abuses and to effect change in behaviour.

Vatican II adopted a completely different style and tone. It took to heart the approach suggested by Pope John. It adopted a much more conversational style and tone. It was the language of sensitive pastors, encouraging dialogue and calling for genuine, heartfelt renewal in the Church. The Council tried to persuade us to see the truth and value of the Gospel and the joy of living according to its vision. It appealed to our noblest selves, for us to do what we genuinely know to be good, true and honourable.

The Council set an example for us in how we approach those who don't share our appreciation of the Gospel or even those who may have turned away from it, whether within our own families or our circles of friends and colleagues. This is precisely the style and tone that Pope Francis has been adopting – approaching people respectfully, always

taking the other person and their position seriously and in good faith. We can hold our principles and the truths of our faith, but we can, at the same time, respect the good conscience of another person who disagrees with us. As Pope Francis famously said 'who am I to judge'. We may not agree with the course of action a person has taken, we may try to persuade them to see the situation differently, but we can always do this sensitively and respectfully, never in a dismissive or condemnatory way. Gentleness, sensitivity and compassion have to mark our ways of engagement. St Francis de Sales, put it more graphically, " we will catch more flies with a spoon of honey than a barrel of vinegar".

I will say something briefly about the content of the Council documents. They present us with an attractive, inviting image of God. It said that God speaks to us as friends, moves among us and invites us to receive him into our company. That is an extraordinary statement, when you stop to think of it. God is moving among us and wishes to be part of our company. It echoes a beautiful line in the book of Revelation: Look I am standing at the door knocking. If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in to share his meal, side by side with him (Rev 3:20). That is so different from images of God that so many of us carry around – a God who is judgemental and punitive. Our God is a God who desires to be part of our company and who also desires that we be part of God's company, sharing the table with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is no secret that our image of God influences how we relate to God and how we relate to one another. If God

is our friend and we cultivate that friendship, then it is more likely that we will approach other people more as friends than as threats to us.

The second idea that I would like to share is a dominant image of Church that is presented by the Council. It speaks of the pilgrim people of God, an image that has been taken up again by Pope Francis. We are on a journey, like pilgrims. We move at different paces, some are better prepared for the journey than others, some will make rapid progress, others will stumble and fall along the way. If we are on a pilgrim journey together we look out for one another, we support one another, we are patient with those who are less fit or less well equipped. So, too, in the Church. We are disciples of Jesus together. Like all pilgrims we keep our destination in view, but we encourage and support one another along the way, irrespective of our age, our status or our holiness.

This is the kind of Church, as proposed by Vatican II, that Pope Francis is encouraging us to cultivate. That is why he has been talking about a synodal Church. He, too, sees the Church is on a journey, discovering how best we can reach our destination together as a people in good relationship with one another and ultimately sharing the joy of a lasting relationship with God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Pope Francis is inviting us to allow the vision of Vatican II to flourish as was it envisaged by Pope John XXIII and the bishops who joined him at the Council over sixty years ago.

