

Sion Community, Brentwood

May 25, 2013

Talk 1: Bishop Francis and the Second Vatican Council

With the election of Cardinal Bergoglio as bishop of Rome and his taking the name Francis, I am reminded of similarities with the election of Cardinal Roncalli in 1958. In both cases, there has been a major change of style, with the new Pope having an informality, a closeness to the people, a sense of humour, an obvious humility, a dislike of pomp and court ceremonial. In both cases, many stories about the new Pope began to circulate. And as in 1958, the conclave of 2013 has given rise to real interest and attention among people with no connections or attraction to the Church. And among many of the most dedicated Catholics, there was great excitement, with raised hopes and expectations.

Many of these hopes and expectations relate to the Second Vatican Council. There is a widespread feeling, perhaps stronger in my generation that lived through the Council, that the Church got tired of the Council, and we paid it lip service, in good Catholic fashion. But we had had enough renewal and change, and what we needed now was just stability. So many of the Vat 2 generation felt that there had only been partial implementation of the Council. And now, we have the first Pope ordained priest after the completion of the Council saying that he sees the Council as unfinished agenda that he will do all in his power to bring to fruition. So massive hopes are again unleashed among the Vatican Two people, and perhaps real fears among the “back to Catholic normality” brigade.

Francis speaks frequently of being on a journey together, walking together.

Inevitably with a new Pope who arouses such hopes, there is comparison with his immediate predecessors to their disadvantage. There are Catholics generally of a more liberal disposition, mostly with grey or white hair, who think that John Paul II and Benedict XVI backtracked on the Council. I do not

agree with this judgment. These critics may well judge Bishop Francis by whether he allows married priests, communion for remarried divorcees and intercommunion with other Christians. They will probably be disappointed. These were not decisions or expressed wishes of the Council. They are urged by their proponents as being “in the spirit of the Council”.

I see Bishop Francis as reconnecting with Pope John’s pastoral vision for the Council. John coined the Italian word *aggiornamento* which means a bringing up to date. Many people took this to be a call to relevance. In fact, it was much more what we call “spring-cleaning”, removing the cobwebs and the clutter that has obscured the simplicity and clarity of the gospel. This is what Fr Raniero called for in his Good Friday homily this year:

“We must do everything possible so that the Church may never look like that complicated and cluttered castle described by Kafka, and the message may come out of it as free and joyous as when the messenger began his run. We know what the impediments are that can restrain the messenger: dividing walls, starting with those that separate the various Christian churches from one another, the excess of bureaucracy, the residue of past ceremonials, laws and disputes, now only debris. ...

As happens with certain old buildings. Over the centuries, to adapt to the needs of the moment, they become filled with partitions, staircases, rooms and closets. The time comes when we realize that all these adjustments no longer meet the current needs, but rather are an obstacle, so we must have the courage to knock them down and return the building to the simplicity and linearity of its origins. This was the mission that was received one day by a man who prayed before the Crucifix of San Damiano: “Go, Francis, and repair my Church”.

The other word used to describe the purpose of the Council was *ressourcement*, a French word meaning going back to the sources. This was how Benedict XVI saw it, the view of a theologian who is viewing the renewal of the Church through the prism of theology. Removal of the clutter is the vision of the pastor, who is thinking of the spiritual good of the people.

In one of his final addresses, Benedict XVI contrasted the real Council with the Council of the media. “We know that this Council of the media was accessible to everyone. Therefore, this was the dominant one, the more effective one, and it created so many disasters, so many problems, so much suffering: seminaries closed, convents closed, banal liturgy ... and the real Council had difficulty establishing itself and taking shape; the virtual Council was stronger than the real Council. But the real force of the Council was present and, slowly but surely, established itself more and more and became the true force which is also the true reform, the true renewal of the Church. It seems to me that, 50 years after the Council, we see that this virtual Council is broken, is lost, and there now appears the true Council with all its spiritual force. And it is our task, especially in this Year of Faith, on the basis of this Year of Faith, to work so that the true Council, with its power of the Holy Spirit, be accomplished and the Church be truly renewed.”

In relation to the Council, the focus of Francis seems different from that of Benedict. For Benedict, a major focus was getting back on track, understanding the real Council, setting aside deviant interpretations. For Francis, it seems that the focus is on allowing the Holy Spirit to lead the Church forward: he sees many within the Church resisting the full work of the Spirit.

“Let us celebrate this anniversary – he said – let us make a monument that doesn't bother anyone. We don't want to change. Indeed, there are some who wish to go backwards. This is what is called being stubborn, this is called wanting to tame the Holy Spirit, this is called poor judgement and slow hearted.” “The same thing happens in our personal lives,” the Pope said. In fact, “the Spirit pushes us to take a more evangelical path, “ but we resist. Finally, he urged: “don't try to fight the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit that sets us free, with Jesus' freedom, with that freedom of God's children.”

“Don't resist the Holy Spirit: this – Pope Francis said – is what I would like all of us to ask the Lord for: docility to the Holy Spirit, to that Spirit that comes to us and makes us go forward on the path of holiness, that holiness of the Church which is so

beautiful. The grace of docility to the Holy Spirit.” “To say it clearly, the Holy Spirit annoys us. Because he moves us”, he explained, “he makes us journey, he pushes the Church to go forward,” (Homily April 16).

All this suggests that Francis does not have the same sympathy for the lovers of the pre-1962 liturgy that Benedict had. Certainly not for their antipathy to the post-conciliar liturgy of 1970.

There are signs too that Francis will carry a stage further the distancing of the Church and the Vatican from the imperial past. He dislikes the apparatus and the pomp of the papal court. He refuses everything that puts the pope on a pedestal (armchair at same level as ecumenical guests; Schönborn on lift at Sancta Martha; no papal limousine).

But the key to interpreting the ministry of Francis will probably be his sharing with the Cardinals during the conclave: his rejection of the “self-referential Church”:

“When the Church does not come out of herself to evangelize, she becomes self-referential and then gets sick. (cf. The deformed woman of the Gospel). The evils that, over time, happen in ecclesial institutions have their root in self-referentiality and a kind of theological narcissism. [In Revelation, Jesus says that he is at the door and knocks. Obviously, the text refers to his knocking from the outside in order to enter but I think about the times in which Jesus knocks from within so that we will let him come out.] The self-referential Church keeps Jesus Christ within herself and does not let him out.

When the Church is self-referential, inadvertently, she believes she has her own light; she ceases to be the *mysterium lunae* and gives way to that very serious evil, spiritual worldliness (which according to De Lubac, is the worst evil that can befall the Church). It lives to give glory only to one another.”

This is the Church focused on herself, no doubt in very holy language, full of pious practices and very orthodox messages. This shows the radicality of Pope Francis: this he infers is the greatest evil that can befall the Church. When I look back, I can

see the seminary system I experienced was largely a formation for the self-referential Church. Apologetics was the presentation of the self-referential Church, proclaimed simply as “the one true Church”.