

Towards A Renewed Church

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It was the Second Vatican Council that brought the word “renewal” to the fore in Catholic terminology. Vatican Two was called as a council of renewal. Two different words were used to describe the purpose of the Council: the Italian word *aggiornamento* meaning updating, making relevant and the French word *ressourcement* meaning a going back to the sources. The Council in line with Catholic self-understanding as the Church of tradition presented the teaching and the decisions of the Council as in full continuity with the past.

Revolution or Development?

As you know, the famous 19th century English convert to the Catholic faith, John Henry Newman, later Cardinal, had written a book entitled *The Development of Christian Doctrine*. Since that time, the word “development” has been used to describe the changes that have occurred over the centuries in Catholic doctrine. “Development” emphasises historical continuity, it discounts sudden change and does not allow for reversal. The impression given is that historical development of the faith means going from good to better to best.

But in fact at Vatican Two there were at least two elements that cannot really be understood in terms of development and that is fact had a revolutionary character. The first was the decision for dialogue, based on the dignity of the human person, first expressed in Paul VI’s first encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* in late 1964 and then in major Council documents, especially the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. *Ecclesiam Suam* presents three tasks for the Church: Self-Awareness, Renewal and Dialogue. A greater self-awareness of the Church, both of her riches and of her needs, leads to renewal. Renewal requires and leads to dialogue. For Paul VI, dialogue is the way of the Lord, and therefore it is the way of the Church.

Why was this revolutionary? Although there have been notable instances of dialogue in the history of the Church, e.g. Matteo Ricci in China, in general I think we have to confess that dialogue has not been the preferred way of the Church. Dialogue did not prevail at the time of the Reformation. It was not the way of the Church with Galileo. It was not the way of Pius IX in the Syllabus of Errors. It was not the way of the Church with theological explorers, and it had never been the way of the Church with the Jewish people.

A second area where major change occurred at Vatican Two that cannot properly be understood in terms of development was in regard to the Jewish people. While it is true that the Catholic Church had not previously given any official teaching about the status of the Jewish people after the Christ-event, the teaching of Vatican Two had no precedent in Catholic tradition. Thus the

paragraph in *Nostra Aetate* teaching that God has not rejected the Jewish people, that the covenant with them still stands “for the gifts and call of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11: 29) and that they are not to be regarded as an accursed people is the one doctrinal section of Vatican Two with no citation from the Fathers of the Church. The reason is that no Father of the Church taught the irrevocable covenant with Israel.

The Break-through Initiative of John Paul II

In 1994, John Paul II made his historic call for a Catholic confession of the sins of the past in the Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, calling the Catholic Church to prepare for the Great Jubilee Year 2000. It is clear that these two areas of dialogue and of the Jewish people were prominent in his mind as he made this call. It was the organised murder of six million European Jews in the Holocaust that had been pushing the Catholic Church toward this confession of sin. The question could not be avoided: “How could such an appalling evil have taken place in officially Christian Europe?” When as part of the preparation for the Great Jubilee the Pope set up two historical-theological commissions to study major wrongs in the history of the Church, the two subjects chosen were the treatment of the Jewish people throughout the centuries, and the Spanish Inquisition, itself especially preoccupied with the baptised Jews, known as the Marranos. And in the text of *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, the Pope specified among sins especially needing to be confessed those sins of “intolerance and even the use of violence in the service of the truth” (para. 35).

In other words, the elements I am calling revolutionary have a huge importance for effective renewal of the Church because they represent at least implicitly a confession of sin and a repentance for negative elements in the past. I believe the Holy Spirit has been leading the Catholic Church to the point of recognising that Church history is not just development, but also repentance and rebirth. In other words, effective renewal of the Church depends on acknowledging what was not just undeveloped, but wrong and harmful. We will come back to this.

At the centre of Vatican Two was the renewal of ecclesiology, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, known as *Lumen Gentium*. The dominant image of the Church in mid-19th century theology was of “the perfect society”. In fact, this image does not even allow for development. The first moves towards renewal came with a new attention to the biblical image of “the Body of Christ”. Some of the older ones present will know the seminal work of the Belgian scholar, Emile Mersch, on this subject (1st edition, 1932). This vision was affirmed by the Church’s magisterium in Pius XII’s encyclical letter *Mystici Corporis Christi* (“the mystical Body of Christ”) in 1943. This biblical image, of key importance in the New Testament, clearly allowed for organic growth and development. This rediscovery began a process of experiencing the Church not primarily as institution, but as a spiritual reality.

At Vatican Two *Lumen Gentium* contextualised this image of the Body of Christ. It first presented the Church as the People of God, the covenanted people of God, the dominant image in the Old Testament, and then presented the many New Testament images, particularly the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

While the image of the Body of Christ points to the unity and identity of Christ and the Church, the other images point to a dialogical reality. The Church as Bride can be unfaithful, like Jerusalem had been. There are ups and downs in the relationship of bridegroom and bride, as Catherine of Siena well realised. The Church as Temple of the Spirit is more alive in the Spirit at some times and in some places than at others.

My key point here is this: Only as the Church recognises her infidelity can real renewal take place. This means confession of sin and acknowledge of weakness. This is as true of the relationship between the Lord and the Church, as it is true of the relationship between the Lord and each individual Christian.

In this light, I believe the historic call of John Paul II in 1994 for a Catholic confession of the sins of the past opens the door to a real renewal in the life of the Catholic Church, of which what we have seen so far is just the preparation. For without confession of sin and repentance, efforts at renewal are restricted to rearrangement and reorganisation, to rethinking and reshaping, but without fundamental transformation.

Examples of Lack of Repentance and Difficulty in Renewal

Let us now look at some examples in Catholic life and practice.

1. Human Rights in the Church. In the period since Vatican II, the Church leadership has increasingly spoken up for human rights in society. The subject was first treated in the famous encyclical of John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*. But it has been often remarked that the Church is not so good at practicing human rights and honouring the dignity of the human person in her own internal procedures. The example I want to consider briefly, that of child abuse, has been much in the news in the USA and Canada, in Britain and in Ireland; and it has not spared France either.

In England, my impression is that the issue has been as well handled by the Catholic hierarchy, as in any of the countries affected. Soon after becoming Archbishop of Westminster, Archbishop – later Cardinal - Murphy-O'Connor established an independent commission to make recommendations to the Bishops. As chairman, he appointed a leading Catholic judge, Lord Nolan, with members drawn from all concerned professions, mostly not Catholics, together with one bishop. The Cardinal insisted that the Church's practice

must not just be free from blame, but must be an example as the best practice, a model for how the whole of society should act.

But what has happened is that there have been changes in administrative policies and the establishment of procedures for handling allegations as well as the making of apologies. But there has not really been any confession of past sin. The difference concerns God. Priorities can be changed, procedures can be initiated, and apologies can even be given without any explicit reference to God. But the confession of sin involves the recognition that our behaviour is first of all an offence against God. As I shall mention in a moment, Pope John Paul II has recognised this point clearly in his teaching on ecumenical dialogue in *Ut Unum Sint*. It is perhaps this failure to confess sin which is especially scandalous to the public. It is now recognised that the first priority is the welfare of vulnerable children. It is often recognised that the first priority in the past had been the reputation of the Church, understood as institution. It is seen that this was wrong, but it was not just procedurally wrong, but a self-serving choice of the wrong priority, which could almost serve as a definition for sin.

The instinct is to rely on new procedures, rather than a change of heart. I am not saying that there has been no change of heart, but that we have no ways of expressing this, no framework in which to confess the sins of the whole community. The danger then is that the reformed procedures do not fully accomplish what is intended.

2. **Evangelisation.** Evangelisation entered everyday Catholic terminology later than the terms renewal and dialogue. It was another important contribution of Paul VI with his letter *Evangelii Nuntiandi* in 1975, following a synod of bishops on this topic in 1974. There isn't time here to go into the way the Catholic understanding of evangelisation has evolved between 1972, when the new Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) was published, and 1997, when the General Directory on Catechesis was issued.

What is new is a realisation that many Catholics have never really heard the Gospel of salvation. As Cardinal Suenens notably said: "Many have been sacramentalised but not evangelised." It may be more accurate to make a distinction between families with some faith and those with virtually no practice. Children from the former were often inculturated into the Church, much as they were socialised into local society. They received something more valuable, but there was not any focus on the Gospel to produce conversion. The phrase "sacramentalised but not evangelised" seems more applicable to children from non-practising homes. The whole "new evangelisation" of John Paul II is based on this realisation.

In Catholic documents since Vatican II, a distinction is being clearly made between "initial" or "primary proclamation" and catechesis, between

presentation of the gospel of salvation and all Christian religious education. It is not a course in Catholic doctrine that produces conversion but the proclamation of an event, the announcing of the Good News. Unfortunately not all those involved in catechetical work have yet understood this. It has been best grasped perhaps by people in some of the new ecclesial movements, particularly for example in the Catholic charismatic renewal, in the Community of Sant' Egidio and in the Focolari.

Unfortunately, the new evangelisation and catechetical renewal are mostly being addressed in the framework of reorganisation, not in the framework of confession of sin and new birth, or we could say of death and resurrection. So I do not know of any occasion where Catholics responsible for education and formation have got on their knees together, and begun by a confession: "We have sinned. We have not preached the Gospel of salvation to our young people. When they asked for bread, we gave them a book. When they asked for meat, we gave them a system." I am not wanting to suggest that a formula of confession will solve all our problems. But I am saying that we have to face Almighty God with our lives and our situations. There has to be a dialogue with the Lord, and not just a discussion with each other. Until this happens, we will be better at talking about evangelisation than doing it.

3. **Ecumenism.** In fact, what I have just said about facing God is precisely what John Paul II says about ecumenical relations in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* of 1995. Here the Pope introduced a new concept into the Catholic understanding of dialogue: that it involves an "examination of conscience": "a radical exhortation to acknowledge our condition as sinners ought also to mark the spirit which we bring to ecumenical dialogue" (para. 34). The Pope's view of dialogue embraces God and humans: "Dialogue cannot take place merely on a horizontal level, being restricted to meetings, exchanges of points of view or even the sharing of gifts proper to each community. It also has a primarily vertical thrust, directed towards the one who, as the Redeemer of the world and the Lord of history, is himself our reconciliation." (para. 35). John Paul II

What is remarkable here is that John Paul II was developing a vision rather than describing what has actually been happening in inter-church theological dialogue. For in none of the bilateral dialogues in which the Catholic Church had been engaged for almost thirty years had the participants begun to address and confess the sins of their faith community. One of the major ecumenical achievements has been the joint Lutheran – Catholic declaration on Justification by Faith (1999). But as far as I know, it has not been accompanied by any Catholic confession of sin that "We did not preach clearly the Gospel of justification by faith." But some such confession seems to be what the Pope sees to be necessary if there is to be deep and lasting fruit: "It is precisely this acknowledgment [of being sinners] which creates in brothers and sisters living in Communities not in full communion with one

another that interior space where Christ, the source of the Church's unity, can effectively act, with all the power of his Spirit, the Paraclete.” (para. 35).

In this light, we can see the lack of confession and repentance as a major reason for the slow progress in ecumenical relations, and the widespread impression of “ecumenical doldrums” or an “ecumenical winter”. Interestingly, there is one dialogue that seems to be moving in this direction, and it is one that only began after the encyclical: the Catholic – Mennonite dialogue. They have decided to study together the document from the papal theological commission *Memory and Reconciliation*, which is the theological rationale for the confession of the sins of the past. The fierce persecution of the Mennonites in their first decades of existence makes this a case, where productive dialogue would appear to be impossible without a Catholic confession of the sins of violence committed against the first generations of Mennonites.

Ecumenism has a bearing on all other issues, including evangelisation. In *Ut Unum Sint*, John Paul II does a remarkable piece of adapted citation. He takes a teaching of *Lumen Gentium* (para. 13) about the nature of the Church and applies it to ecumenical relations: “Dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some way it is always an “exchange of gifts”.” (para. 28). In other words, Catholic renewal in evangelisation means learning from other Christian communities, who are more gifted in this area. This means in practice Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians.

In some parts of the world, Catholic spokesmen (this is not a lapse into sexist language, for the habit seems to be more masculine) confronted by the success of Evangelical and Pentecostal evangelism resort to accusations and innuendo to explain their success. Their evangelism is successful because the evangelists are dishonest, superficial, in the pay of the CIA, etc. This is the behaviour of pre-dialogue days. On the contrary, my conclusion is that Evangelicals and Pentecostals are more successful in leading people to Christian conversion, whatever the inadequacies of their theology, because they preach the need for a radical break from sin. Catholics often preach or urge process, which usually reduces to moral improvement. But the New Testament concept of Christian initiation, expressed in our rite of baptism, is of death and resurrection.

4. **Eschatology.** Rather remarkably, there is a rich and deeply biblical theology of the last things, the *eschata*, in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. I say “remarkably” because this seems to be a subject much neglected in Catholic theology and preaching. Yet eschatology is foundational for a profound renewal of the Church. Eschatology presents the true hope of the Church, the coming of the Lord and his kingdom in its fulness with the resurrection of the dead. It is a message of great relevance to our world that is increasingly concerned about impending ecological disaster, and in which holistic

spiritualities have great appeal. Without a clear proclamation and living of this hope, the Church will never do better than limp along.

What has enabled the authors of the Catholic Catechism to retrieve the ancient eschatological tradition of the Church? Evidently, this recovery of ancient tradition has been particularly the work of biblical and of liturgical scholars. As we know, the biblical renewal and liturgical renewal in the Catholic Church have gone hand in hand. The liturgical texts have always retained a strong eschatological dimension, even when these elements played little part in Catholic piety and in Catholic preaching.

So many of the most striking statements in the Catechism about the eschatological hope of the Church are made in relation to the liturgy and particularly to the eucharist:

"The Holy Spirit's transforming power in the liturgy hastens the coming of the kingdom and the consummation of the mystery of salvation. While we wait in hope he causes us really to anticipate the fullness of communion with the Holy Trinity."
(para. 1107).

"The Church celebrates the mystery of her Lord 'until he ... comes' when God will be 'everything to everyone.' Since the apostolic age the liturgy has been drawn towards its goal by the Spirit's groaning in the Church *Marana tha!*" (para. 1130)¹.

However, the rediscovery of Christian eschatology probably owes most to the rediscovery of our Jewish roots. This is of course at the heart of biblical renewal. For a return to the Scriptures cannot avoid being at the same time a return to the Jewish roots. The return to the Scriptures necessarily highlights **memorial** and **promise**. The whole life of Israel is stretched out between memorial of God's dealings with his people, especially of the foundational event of the deliverance from Egypt and the theophany of Sinai, and promise of the Messiah and the messianic kingdom that will bring full deliverance to God's people. In the Church both the memorial and the promise are expanded: the memorial now extends to incarnation, death and resurrection-ascension of the Messiah, and the promise is the extension of the glory of resurrection in the Messianic kingdom through the return or second coming of the Messiah.

Why have we not preached the second coming of the Lord?
Perhaps because we have associated this message with a

¹ See also the statements about the Our Father as essentially an eschatological prayer in paras. 2771 – 72.

fundamentalism seen as fanatical. But the reason is more likely that we have too easily said that all the promises of the Old Testament were fulfilled in the (first) coming of Christ. This inevitably produces a conservative Church that sees its task primarily in terms of fidelity to the past, understood as the revelation of all truth. This position has lost the tension between memorial and promise.

The recognition at Vatican Two that the covenant with Israel was never revoked, and that the Jews remain “the people of the covenant” belongs to the eschatological rediscovery. That the Jewish people are not rejected goes with the assertion of their place in the eschatological climax, as is recognised in the Catechism, where under the extraordinary heading “The glorious advent of Christ, the hope of Israel” it says: “The glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by 'all Israel'. ... The 'full inclusion' of the Jews in the Messiah's salvation, in the wake of 'the full number of the Gentiles,' will enable the People of God to achieve 'the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ,' in which 'God may be all in all'.” (para. 674).²

However, there remains here a gap between official teaching in the Catechism and the actual faith of the Catholic people. Is it not because there has been no acknowledgment of our past failure to preach what is the hope of Israel and of the Church? Only a repentance for past failures in the Church can bring about a transformation and restore a living eschatology to the faith of the people.

What Can Be Done?

Perhaps it is the eschatological issue that most clearly points the way ahead. For the weakening of eschatological hope in the Church is not just the result of a two thousand year wait, but of a distancing from the Jewish heritage with its strong messianic orientation. This demonstrates most clearly how our healing and renewal can only come from a new degree of reconnection to the Jewish root.

I have suggested that the two most revolutionary elements in the Second Vatican Council, the opening to dialogue and the recognition of the irrevocable covenant with the Jewish people, are those that led to the Pope's call for a Catholic repentance for the sins of the past. But we must now address the practical question: how are we Catholics to confess our sin as a people? At present, we do not have any adequate vehicle to express our penitence before God as a

¹⁸ The passages cited bring together Paul's teaching in Rom. 11: 12, 25 – 26, Eph. 4: 13 and 1 Cor. 15: 28.

people. There is no doubt much in the liturgy of Lent that is important here, but we have so privatised our understanding of sin and our practice of confession that our Confiteor lacks any corporate substance. Maybe the reproaches in the Good Friday liturgy, based on Micah 6: 3) still express this sense the most clearly: “My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you. Answer me.”

However, we do find such a corporate sense of confession of sin in the Jewish heritage, expressed in the liturgy of Yom Kippour, the Day of Atonement. This forms part of a tradition of lamentation, expressed in several Psalms and especially in the book of Lamentations. The lamentation is above all for the disasters that had come upon Israel and Judah because of their sin. It would seem that the prophets played a major role in the celebration of Yom Kippour. For the consciousness of “the sin of the people” was particularly articulated by men like Jeremiah (see Jer. 9: 7), who confessed that “we and our fathers” have sinned against the Lord of the covenant (Jer. 3: 25; 14: 20). Lamentation represents something whole-hearted in Israel’s response to the prophetic challenge. This whole-heartedness flows from the dialogical relationship within the covenant. The same whole-heartedness is found in another form of Israelite prayer, what Walter Brueggemann has described as: “Yahweh mobilised by cries from the Pit”³. The need for the people to cry out to the Lord in the people’s desperate need is closely linked to crying out to the Lord in repentance for their sin as a people.

The lack of expression of corporate repentance contributes to a church culture that is often full of criticism and blame. We are well accustomed to criticising others in the Church, whether to the right or to the left. We are not so accustomed to taking the concerns that lie behind our criticisms to the Lord in penitent and prophetic prayer. Jeremiah saw all too clearly the evils in the Judah and Jerusalem of his day. But he did not complain. He identified with his people in their sin. “We and our fathers have sinned”.

How can we restore such a practice, reclaim this heritage? Well, I don’t think it can be done by the issuance of a document from the Vatican. It requires a prophetic work as did the original Jewish tradition. And in fact, John Paul II’s call for a Catholic confession of the sins of the past is more a prophetic act than a juridical decision. We should expect the Holy Spirit to raise up prophetic voices to meet this need. One such prophetic voice is being heard from the Community of Sant’ Egidio with their work for reconciliation.

But I want to finish by offering you this thought. It is that we should expect the biggest contribution to the restoration of a corporate repentance and a corporate cry to the Lord to come from the Church in the land of Israel. Why do I say this? I can think of three main reasons. First, it has to come from those Catholic

³ *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 556.

milieux that are most deeply in touch with the Jewish tradition and who have most interiorised the love of the Lord for the people of the covenant never revoked. Maybe the appointment of Mgr Gourion as bishop for the Hebrew-speaking Catholic community is a harbinger of such a creative interaction of the Catholic and the Jewish traditions. Secondly, it may need to come from this situation of the most desperate need, where no human solution appears to be possible, where no side is pure, and where the conflict easily becomes one between prophetic and moral claims. Both a deep crying out to the Lord and a deep repentance for hatred and injustice are needed. Thirdly, the eschatological pressure is greatest in Israel, especially in Jerusalem. The Church's recognition that God's covenant with the Jewish people has never been revoked has theological implications for the land of Israel. We should not let our reactions to simplistic Evangelical fundamentalist views prevent us from grappling with this issue. This need is rooted in the profound link between the gift of the land and the Jewish calling and identity. The theological issue is the place of the land, not of the State, though that also colours the picture.. It is

Another reason why the corporate confession of sin by our Churches needs to start in Jerusalem is that the divisions within the Church are here most deeply ensconced. Here they are most scandalous, and here they are the most intractable. What can we do but cry out to the Lord in humility and repentance?