



The Churches between Renewal and Regression. With specific reference to the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965)

01.03.2009 | Zenger, Erich

The past 60 years have completely changed both the face of the Christian Churches and the entire ecclesiastical scene. History has forced the Churches to rid themselves of many inherited burdens and to renew themselves. The reforms which they each dared to undergo not only within themselves but also in their relationship to one another came about, on the one hand, as a result of hope and courage, but on the other hand, aroused fear and resistance.

The Churches between Renewal and Regression

With specific reference to the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965)

Erich Zenger

1.

The past 60 years have completely changed both the face of the Christian Churches and the entire ecclesiastical scene. History has forced the Churches to rid themselves of many inherited burdens and to renew themselves. The reforms which they each dared to undergo not only within themselves but also in their relationship to one another came about, on the one hand, as a result of hope and courage, but on the other hand, aroused fear and resistance. For change is often hard and painful. Institutions are likely to resist change, not least when they, like the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches, consider their structures as being divinely inspired. True, there is the saying *ecclesia semper reformanda* and the emphatic confession of trust in the Holy Spirit as the life principle of the Church. However, *de facto*, the fear of the unpredictable Spirit of God is so deep in most officials that where church reforms are concerned they prefer to put their trust in time-honoured traditions and consulting firms, alien to theology. Under no circumstance does one want renewals which would mean real breaches or even breakdowns. Theologians who all too resolutely call for fundamental reforms or go their own new ways are suspected as destroyers of the faith, disciplined with a ban on writing and teaching, or even suspended from their church offices. One hears all too frequently that any secular firm would deal with their employees even more rigorously. But the Churches are, after all, not business enterprises. And the office bearers are not the owners or „masters of the Church“, but, as they themselves like to repeat, servants of the community – above all servants of God who is the centre of the Church and of church communities.

There is no doubt about it: the history of the Churches swings to and fro between breakup and

breakdown, reform and counter reform, hope and fear, openness and narrowness, freedom and oppression. The oscillations are on the one hand connected with overall constellations in world history; on the other hand individuals (office holders, theologians, charismatics) play a great role in the Churches. That is also true for the history of the Churches in the past sixty years, which cannot be dealt with in detail here. Simplifying matters greatly, one can say that the first thirty years were determined by various forms of renewal, the next ten years suffered the pressures of restoration, the last twenty years oscillated between renewal and regression. I want to illustrate this movement of alternating between renewal and regression with the example of the Second Vatican Council and in doing so reflect especially on the relationship of the Catholic Church to the Jews.

2.

The catastrophic experiences of the Nazi era and the Second World War called for reflection and renewal worldwide in both politics and society - and also in the Church. Looking back, one has to admit that the Churches in Germany after 1945 were not among the main agents of renewal and reform. They were far too preoccupied with themselves. The Catholic Church in particular was anxious to defend her vested rights. There was no great readiness for renewal or – even less – a painstaking examination of the Church's failing with regard to the Jews.

The initiatives for renewals came from outside. For the Catholic Church in Germany, the initiative for renewal and reform came, surprisingly enough, from Rome. For most Catholics „Rome“ stands for clinging to the status quo and fighting against new concepts. Rome is seen as the bastion of immutability against all that is modern, with anything that deviates from its point of view readily discredited with labels such as Modernism and Relativism. It is true to say that the initiative which will be considered now was not a carefully planned and prepared strategy of the Curia , but the almost spontaneous idea of the charismatic Pope John XXIII, who a few weeks after his unexpected election surprised the Curia and the world with his idea of a council for the renewal of the Catholic Church. In his diary he himself describes how this idea crossed his lips in a routine conversation with Cardinal State Secretary Domenico Tardini: „Suddenly there came to Us (unconventional as he was, Pope John XXIII still clung to conventions in many ways) an inspiration like a flower which blossoms in an unexpected spring. Our soul was illumined by a great idea... A word, solemn and binding, formed itself on Our lips. Our voice uttered it for the first time – Council!“

What the Pope had in mind and what, as we know today, frightened many of those surrounding him, was summed up by him in the multifaceted term *aggiornamento*. The opponents of the Council translated or rather interpreted the word as „adjustment“ and fought against it, because the Church, as we know, must not adjust herself to the world or to that which is modern. The resistance against this idea of a council is understandable when one calls to mind that, for instance, the motto of the then Prefect of the Holy Office, later called Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, was: „Semper idem“ (always the same). But the reproach of „adjustment“, which insinuated the abandonment of identity, was a wrong interpretation of the word by which John XXIII intended to mean a spiritual renewal and the revival of faith and life in the Church – also and especially in its mission of salvation for the whole world. *Aggiornamento* was a programmatic term meaning renewal, beginning a new epoch in Church history and the search for a kind, believable face of the Church in an increasingly secularized world. What was on John XXIII's mind is clearly shown in an frequently cited anecdote. It tells of a visitor asking John XXIII what he himself expected from the Council, whereupon the Pope went to the window of his study and opened it, saying, „We expect the Council to bring fresh air into the Church!“ Whereas most cardinals and dignitaries surrounding him were of the opinion that the Church had to be protected from the evil air of the world, John XXIII trusted in the breath of the Holy Spirit who would certainly also have to renew the face of the Church itself (cf. Ps 104:30).

When on January 25, 1959, following a Mass in the basilica S Paolo Fuori le Mura, a few days

after his conversation with the Cardinal Secretary of State, John XXIII announced his „idea of a council“ to the cardinals who were present in Rome, they did not respond with applause and enthusiasm, but rather with awe-stricken silence and amazement. The story goes that Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini, later Pope Paul VI and successor of John XXIII, on the evening of this announcement by John XXIII called his friend, Oratorian and later Cardinal, Giulio Bevilacqua, and said to him, „This holy old boy does not seem to notice what hornet's nest he is stirring up.“ But Bevilacqua is said to have answered, „Never fear, Don Battista, don't lose heart; the Holy Spirit is still awake in the Church.“

Indeed, the Second Vatican Council meant a tremendous change for the Catholic Church, but brought it about in the context of a dramatic conflict between a reform-oriented majority of the Council Fathers and a minority averse to reform. This antagonism still exists today. It seems that the proponents of reversal, not least under the guidance of the present Pope Benedict XVI, have again become the majority. It is almost to be feared that the statement of an opponent of reform and the council, the Archbishop of Genoa, Cardinal Giuseppe Siri, who in 1979 almost became pope, reflects the opinion of many „Churchmen“: „It will take the Church fifty years to recover from the misguided ways of John XXIII.“

3.

It is not possible here to outline the numerous new initiatives inspired by the Second Vatican Council. I list those that for me are the most important and at the same time are the most surprising ones. Set against the background of the history of the councils and traditional theology, the most striking document is the so-called Pastoral Constitution „*Gaudium et Spes*“ („Joy and Hope“), in which the Council effects an opening up of the Church to the world of today and its greatest challenges. Here, for the first time, the Church is not concerned with internal problems (keyword „*ecclesia ad intra*“), but seeks a constructive dialogue with the world (keyword: „*ecclesia ad extra*“). This opening up of the Church was initiated by a now famous speech which John XXIII made on September 11, 1962, shortly before the opening of the Council, in which he distinguished between the „vitality of the Church in internal matters“ and the „vitality for external matters“.

French and Latin-American bishops were the most positive spokesmen in the discussion about the Council constitutions. In particular, the then Secretary of the Latin-American Bishops' Conference, the later Cardinal of Rio de Janeiro, Helder Camara, brought the challenges facing the Church to a head by saying: „Are we to spend all our time discussing internal problems of the Church, while two thirds of mankind are dying of hunger? What have we to offer in the face of underdevelopment? Is the Council going to give expression to its concern about the great problems of mankind? Is Pope John to remain alone in this fight?“ In an assembly of bishops he reduced the problem even more pointedly to the question: „Is the lack of priests the greatest problem of Latin-America? No! Underdevelopment.“

This opening of the Church to the world, accomplished by the Second Vatican Council, has since been carried forward in encyclicals, pontifical speeches, declarations of bishops' conferences, but also in brilliant models such as the Latin-American Liberation Theology or the New Political Theology. However, it has to be said that the appeals of the Church for human rights would be more credible if the Church itself were a shining example of the practice of human rights. It is also deplorable that fears of opening to the world, noticeable already among some of the Council Fathers, have grown so massively especially in the corridors of the Curia. This has resulted, for instance, in representatives of Liberation Theology being censored and marginalized. There has also been the attempt to make the Latin-American Church revert to a pre-Council position with the help of suitable episcopal nominations.

4.

The Second Vatican Council also took daring new steps in the fields of Christian ecumenism, the defence of religious freedom, inter-religious dialogue and especially in the relationship of the Catholic Church to the Jews. There were heated discussions about the respective texts of the Council, which I cannot go into here. In all fairness, it has to be conceded that the opponents of change sensed that the topic of religious freedom, as well as the opening to other churches and above all with the declaration of the eternal relationship of the Church to Israel as the People of the Covenant, never revoked by God, the claim to absoluteness, rigorously maintained until then by the Catholic Church, was at stake. For me, it is the most amazing phenomenon in the Catholic Church that the Council approved these documents. It has also been encouraging that the effect of the Council's enthusiasm for ecumenism and the Christian-Jewish relationship has lasted so long. It is especially admirable with what perseverance, yes even passion that John Paul II again and again emphasized the fundamental relationship of the Church with the Jewish people. However, since the pontificate of Benedict XVI there has been evidence of a definite movement backward. One example of this is the explicit refusal to recognize the Protestant churches as "Church". Another is the new Good Friday prayer of intercession for the Jews. It is clear that the Pope thinks that too much in the way of reform happened in the Council.

Nevertheless, I dare to predict that the dynamic of the changes may be hindered but not stopped – if the Holy Spirit is at work in the Church at all. That, by the way, is also my strong conviction with regard to the other churches.

Translation from the German: Annegret Fuehr with editing by Margaret Shepherd.