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HISTORICAL NECESSITY OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

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Introduction

The historical background for the convocation of the three modern councils, i.e. Council of Trent, First Vatican Council and the Second Vatican Council, is different. Council of Trent was the Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation and a delayed attempt of the Catholic Church to reform the Church, which was urgently felt in the Church, and its impact is experienced even today. After many postponements, Pope Paul III had the moral courage to convoke the Council of Trent to reform the Church. Inner renewal of the Church, definition of dogmas and the pastoral care of the souls were the main aims of the Council. Pope Pius IX was not mentally prepared to assimilate and appreciate the modern concepts like democracy, unified Italy, collegial character of the Church, etc. After defining the dogma of Immaculate Conception, publishing the *Syllabus of Errors* and having feared the attack on papal infallibility, the Pope decided to convene a Council and define the infallibility of the Pope. However, due to the Franco-Prussian war, the Council was abruptly brought to an end and it did not have a natural conclusion. After the declaration of Rome as the capital of the unified Italy, Pope Pius IX was practically a prisoner in Vatican.

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The Modernist crisis in the beginning of the 20th century and the condemnation of Modernism by Pope Pius X practically closed the doors of any modern, liberal thinking in the field of theology in the Catholic Church. Although by *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943) Pope Pius XII permitted the use of modern historical methods by exegetes of Sacred Scripture, in *Humani generis* (1950) he warned against the accommodation of Catholic theology to intellectual trends. Pope actually wanted to have a natural conclusion of the First Vatican Council. However, the Second World War and other pre-occupations did not give him a healthy ambience to execute his plan.

The Need for Vatican II

In the 2000 years history of the Church, perhaps Vatican II may be the first genuine attempt to study from the part of the Church on herself in a critical and comprehensive way, first attempt to study her relevance in the world, an attempt to adapt herself to the challenges posed by the modern world. The encounter of Christian religion in Asia and Africa with other religions of the world made the Church think of a more inclusive approach rather than an exclusive approach of the existing time. Modern secularisation and the emergence of Communism in Eastern Europe and the clear distinction of Church and State, etc. made the necessity of a re-thinking of the re-imaging of the Church. The two World Wars, Communist persecutions and rigorous attitudes of the Church authorities produced a generation, which was searching for the real face of Christ. Vatican II was a moderate attempt to show the merciful, divine-human face of Christ to the war-torn world. The essence of Christian religion is to share the all embracing, compassionate love of the Incarnate Word, not to be satisfied with the definition of dogmas and doctrines, rituals and outmoded practices.

All the sixteen documents of Vatican II clearly speak in one voice the need of the Church for a renewal and a change of attitude: a renewal within the Church and an attitudinal change towards the modern world. The real mentality of the Church is very well expressed in *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes* No.1: "The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts." The same document No. 4 beautifully summarizes the

radical changes taking place in the world and the mission of the Church in the modern world: "The Church has the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel." The Council is the expression of the fuller awareness of the fact that the Church is in the World and not against the World, the re-discovery of the fact that the Church is "the people of God" and the whole humanity is potentially the Church.

Pope John XXIII is motivated by the concern for the spiritual good of the souls and to equip the Church to meet the spiritual needs of the time. The Council is the result of the strong conviction that it was a new epiphany, awaited by the whole world and the Church would usher into a new era. It is high time for the Church to respond positively to the new, changing and challenging situations. The Church should "move away from its severe cloistering, its suspicion of the modern world, its slowness of movement, and its reluctance in the face of any truly open dialogue."¹

There was a strong move for going back to the origins, to Bible and to patristic literature, to deepen the existing Christian life and Christian spirituality. Attempts were also made to study the non-Christian religions. There was a strong awareness among the members of the Church that the present Christian religion should be made more intelligible to the modern world.

Role of the Councils in the Church

The conciliar tradition of the Church always produced a fertile soil for the renewal of the Church. The collegial and synodal nature of the Church is expressed through the councils and synods throughout the centuries, beginning with the Jerusalem Council. The Councils are the fuller expressions and testimonies of the working of the Holy Spirit in the Church. The Pope viewed the Council as a new Pentecost, a new epiphany, a new way of revealing the Church herself to the modern world.

"In the age-old course of Christian history the great conciliar assemblies constitute a spinal column. Knowledge of their unfolding offers the Church an awareness of one of its basic choral dimensions and evidence of crucial instances of the Spirit's interventions in

¹Giacomo Martina, "The Historical Context In Which The Idea Of A New Ecumenical Council Was Born," in Rene Latourelle, ed., *Vatican II Assessment and Perspectives Twenty Five Years After (1962 – 1987)*, New York: Paulist Press, 1988, 5.

history."² However, the mind of the time was that "after the definition of papal primacy and infallibility at the Vatican Council of 1869-1870, Councils were unnecessary."³

Immediate Historical Background

In the Church there was a clash between more open orientations and more conservative ones. The world scenario was complex with three major factors: the rise of Third World with its own culture and values, freed from colonial domination; the rapid and intensive industrialisation resulting in the prominence of market economy; and, the spread of mass media, especially, the wide popularity of television channels and consequently changing the traditional habits.⁴

End of the era of colonisation led to the era of inculturation and there emerged a slow disliking for the Western culture and decolonisation led also to native leadership in the Church circles.

One age was coming to an end, and another was beginning, in which the Third World would hold an increasingly important position, partly due to its very demographic growth, which would bring the proportion between the population and that of the developed countries from 2 to 1 in 1950 to 3 to 1 in 1970, 5 to 1 in the year 2000.⁵

Other features of the modern world include, shift from agricultural works to industrial works, migration to cities, long evenings before the television, decline in the size of the traditional families, etc.

The day has gone in which people listened to the Church when it gave instructions in the economic, political and social fields. Altruism, commitment, and a religious attitude are today seen as concepts that can only be applied on the individual level, where a choice can be made that is free of any outside pressure.⁶

The Church was on the defensive, immobile, in the face of a rapidly changing world. In the new ambience many historians challenged the role of the traditional Christian religion, especially in Europe. They

²Giuseppe Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II*, Bangalore: Theological Publications In India, 2007, XI.

³Hugh McLeod, ed., *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Vol. 9, World Christianities, 1914 – 2000*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, 307.

⁴Cfr. Giacomo Martina, *The Historical Context*, 6.

⁵Giacomo Martina, *The Historical Context*, 9.

⁶Giacomo Martina, *The Historical Context*, 12.

believed that the Church can remain as a "beleaguered fortress, sufficient into itself and closed to influence from the outside world."⁷

Pope Pius XII through his papacy tried to defend the Christian religion. The encyclicals he published from 1943 to 1947 including *Mystici Corporis*, *Divino afflante Spiritu*, *Mediator Dei*, showed signs of growth in the understanding of the Church and ecclesiology and laid the foundation for the progress that was to come in the course of time. His "regular Christmas messages which show a clear condemnation of any type of totalitarianism, affirm the dignity of the human person and provide orientations for a new international order."⁸ He recognised the legitimacy of the Chinese Rites and encouraged the native bishops.

However, we cannot ignore the negative aspects of the papacy of Pius XII. He did not have a Secretary of State from 1944 to 1958 till his death. The work was carried out by two substitutes who were not Cardinals. "Pope was a tireless worker, but also a great centralizer, who did not want collaborators but simply executors."⁹ His contacts with the bishops were bare minimum and impersonal. In the words of Cardinal Tardini, one of his close collaborators, "During his papacy direct personal contact between the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops of the various dioceses was considerably reduced... Thus, the Roman Curia suffered a certain stagnation, rather like the situation in the body when some irregularities in the circulation of the blood sets in, we old people stayed on, standing in the way and preventing fresher and more robust forces than our own from moving forward."¹⁰

Pope was very much influenced by certain intellectual circles who did not have any good knowledge of ground realities and whose specific orientations landed him in splendid isolation and empowered his tendency towards personal rule. He wanted to defend the Church as a perfect society. To fight against Communism, which had larger followers in Europe, Pope issued a decree in 1949 which refused sacraments to those who voted Communists and excommunicated those who professed its materialistic and

⁷Giacomo Martina, *The Historical Context*, 12.

⁸Giacomo Martina, *The Historical Context*, 13.

⁹Giacomo Martina, *The Historical Context*, 14.

¹⁰D. Tardini, *Pio XII*, Vatican City, 1960, 79, Quoted by Giacomo Martina, *The Historical Context*, 15.

antichristian teachings.¹¹ This decree reaffirmed the conviction of the poor that the Church is on the side of the rich and has no concern for the problems of the marginalised. This led to the politicisation of the ecclesial and religious life of Italy. There also emerged a strained relation between the Church and the State as a result of the continued emphasis on the role of the Church in the political and social sphere and demanded obedience of the Catholics in this regard.

In the field of theology, French Church was very active and the movement of the worker priests in France was looked with suspicion by the authorities of Vatican. The involvement of priests and religious in political demonstrations and struggle for the rights of the workers was looked with suspicion from the part of the Vatican authorities. Cardinal Pizzardo's letter proclaimed the theoretical and practical incompatibility of the extended manual labour with the nature of the priesthood. This letter also challenged any profession that is not directly pastoral not proper to the nature of priesthood. The ecclesiology was one of 19th century and the Church was projected as a perfect society.

However, Y. Congar stressed the need for constant reform in the Church, giving the picture of the true reformer, St. Francis, as clearly distinguished from that of the false reformer, Martin Luther or John Calvin. " It was a question of freeing the Gospel from more or less outmoded sociological, pastoral and liturgical forms, in order to restore to it its full dynamic force in a world that was calling for new forms, new expressions, and the invention of new structures."¹²

Pope shared with the French historian, Bedarida, who visited Rome in 1957, his concern about the French theologians. Bedarida reacted by saying that Vatican failed to understand the great vitality of the Church in France, which was so keen to meet and exchange views with that world that had hitherto shown itself so hostile.¹³

Announcement

At the conclave of 25-28 October 1958, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli , the Patriarch of Venice, was elected the successor of St Peter and took the name Pope John XXIII. The election of this seventy-seven year old man was considered as a caretaker one, a smooth transition for a new

¹¹Giacomo Martina, *The Historical Context*, 18.

¹²Giacomo Martina, *The Historical Context*, 35.

¹³Giacomo Martina, *The Historical Context*, 39.

pope. No one expected any surprise from this born diplomat as he was advancing in his age. Many considered the election of Pope John XXIII as an attempt to bring about some kind of soothing atmosphere in the disturbed environment of the last years of Pope Pius XII. However, he surprised the world and the Catholic Church even before completing three months in office. Pope himself noted down this attitude of the people:

When on October 28, 1958, the cardinals of the Holy Roman Church chose me to assume the supreme responsibility of ruling the universal flock of Jesus Christ, at seventy-seven years of age, everyone was convinced that I would be a provisional and transitional Pope. Yet here I am, already on the eve of the fourth year of my pontificate, with an immense programme of work in front of me to be carried out before the eyes of the world, which is watching and waiting.¹⁴

While the Pope was addressing a group of Cardinals gathered in the Basilica of St Paul outside the walls for a consistory at the close of the week of prayer for the unity of the churches on January 25, 1959 he announced the double celebration of a diocesan synod for the city of Rome and a General Council for the universal Church. These are "the noteworthy aspects of apostolic activity that these three months of presence in and contact with the Roman ecclesiastical world have prompted me to undertake."¹⁵ "Trembling a little with emotion but at the same time humbly resolute in my purpose, I announce to you a double celebration which I propose to undertake: a diocesan synod for the city and a General Council for the Universal Church."¹⁶ The Pope wanted the Council to be pastoral rather than doctrinal.

The aims of the Council, on the one hand include: "The enlightenment, edification and joy of the entire Christian people and, on the other, a renewed cordial invitation to the faithful of the separated Churches to participate with us in this feast of grace and brotherhood, for which so many souls long in all parts of the world."¹⁷ The Pope never intended to condemn errors or to meet threats of schism. So the announcement of Vatican II is different from many previous councils. The convocation of the Council was not

¹⁴G. Roncalli, *Journal of a Soul*, London, 1964, 303.

¹⁵Giuseppe Alberigo, "The Announcement of the Council From the Security of the Fortress to the Lure of the Quest," in Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, ed., *History of Vatican II*, Vol. I, Orbis, Maryknoll/Peeters Leuven, 1995, 1.

¹⁶Giuseppe Alberigo, "The Announcement of the Council...", 1.

¹⁷Giuseppe Alberigo, "The Announcement of the Council...", 15.

from a triumphant Church, but was the result of her strong conviction to shed off all that was not according to the spirit of the Kingdom values. There is a new awareness in theological reflections which is no longer purely scholastic, but biblical and patristic. Reasons for a Council include the very conciliar tradition of the Church and to enlarge the scope of love with magnanimity of heart. There emerged a new concept of the Church. "The Church is on journey and the task of the one who leads it is not to preserve it as though it were a museum."¹⁸ Pope John XXIII had wide world contacts and had contacts with Orthodox, Jews and Muslims. He believed that the idea of a Council was an inspiration from heaven.

The Council is an invitation to the separated communities to join in the search for the unity for which so many long all around the world. It is not a Council of fear, but a Council of unity and the ambience is free to face the supreme problem of unity.

After long reflections, Pope himself suggested the name Second Vatican Council. The name of the Council is indicative of the fact that this would be a new council. The Pope repeatedly highlighted the pastoral and ecumenical aspects of the Council. His call for a Council stemmed from the desire for Christian unity. The Pope described the Council as "the new Pentecost". This expression of Pentecost underlines the

exceptional character of the present historical juncture, the extraordinary prospects which it opened up, and the obligation of the Church to face it through a radical renewal, so that the Church would then be able to present the Gospel message to the world and explain it to human beings with the same power and immediacy that marked the first Pentecost. The reminder of Pentecost also placed in the foreground the action of the Spirit and not that of the Pope or the Church, just as has been the case with the apostles and disciples who had been the objects of the Spirit's mighty and indeed overwhelming action.¹⁹

Role of Pope John in convoking the Council

Lot of discussions are going on the conscious plan of Pope John XXIII, on what he was doing. The composition of the preparatory commissions was indicative of the victory of the bishops over the

¹⁸Giuseppe Alberigo, "The Announcement of the Council...", 39.

¹⁹Giuseppe Alberigo, "The Announcement of the Council...", 42-43.

Vatican curia and assertion of the Council Fathers over the Church bureaucracy.

The decision to convoke a Council was entirely Pope's own choice. There was a proposal to conclude the Vatican I. However, Pope wanted to have a new beginning with a new Council. The decision to convoke the Council was an upsetting action. "The calling of a Council was, then, the fruit of a personal conviction of the Pope, one that slowly took form in his mind, was strengthened by others, and finally became an authoritative and irrevocable decision during the three month period after his election to the Pontificate."²⁰ Pope John XXIII personally wanted to convene the Council and Roman Curia was unaware of it. Pope was very particular that the members of the Roman Curia should not take control of the functioning of the Council. The vision of a new Council, and not a completion of the interrupted Vatican I, was the guiding principle for the Pope's project, and everyone needed some time just to get used to the idea of itself.²¹ His aim was to bring the "Catholics out of the splendid isolation in which many had sought to find protection against modern errors."²² With the reign of John XXIII, the papacy moved out towards the world. "The stiffness was softened, the ritual simplified, the minds more open, the hearts more charitable."²³

Deep sense of history and wider knowledge of historical events, keen and alert to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, wide world experience and a deep rooted spirituality made Pope John XXIII to convoke a Council aiming to have an outward looking Church. In 1948 Cardinal Ernesto Raffini and Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani proposed the Pope Pius XII to have a general Council. They were the first ones to use the expression *aggiornamento*, renewal. For them the aims of the Council included the revision of Canon Law, definition of doctrines and dogmas and to unite the Christians to fight against Communism.

The pope's long years of assignments and mission in Bulgaria, Turkey, France and Germany brought him into contact with Orthodox and Non-Catholic Christians and different types of political

²⁰Giuseppe Alberigo, "The Announcement of the Council...", 13.

²¹Giuseppe Alberigo, "The Announcement of the Council...", 19.

²²Roger Aubert, ed., *Christian Centuries*, Vol. V, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978, 572.

²³John McManners, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, Oxford, 1992, 375.

groupings. "As Pope, he manifested a determination to guide his church toward a reconsideration of its patterns of faith and life in view of the world's needs, and also toward genuine ecumenical relations with other Christian churches."²⁴

The idea of a Council was an unexpected illumination, like a flash of heavenly light, a new Pentecost. The Pope was convinced of the fact that the decision was from God and thus an inspiration from heaven. His intentions in convoking the Council included the Church unity and the peace on earth. According to him the celebration of the Council was an encounter with the face of the risen Lord and a liturgical action. Pope wanted to have the fuller involvement of the different categories of people in the preparation of the Council and it should not be confined to Roman Curia alone. The Council is in response to the strong conviction that the modern version of Christendom was less and less relevant.

Pope "wanted a Council that would mark a transition between two eras, that is, that would bring the Church out of the post-Tridentine period, and, to a degree, out of the centuries long Constantinian era, into a new phase of witness and proclamation, and would also recover substantial and abiding elements of the tradition considered able to nourish and ensure fidelity to the Gospel during so difficult transition."²⁵ The man who convoked the Council, Pope John XXIII was both a saint and a man so that he could think of a Council.

Response

The announcement of an ecumenical Council was received with mixed feelings and the semi-official newspaper of Vatican, *L'Osservatore Romano* did not give due importance to the announcement. The Jesuit run journal, *Civiltà Cattolica*, managed to avoid mention of the Council for a whole year.

The response of the cardinals was slow and very formal. Otto Karrer, a Swiss priest, who was very much involved in the field of ecumenism, opined that the Catholic Church had to harmonise the primatial claims with the fraternal communion that governs inter-ecclesial relations in the Orthodox tradition. He also pointed out the right of the local churches to choose their own bishops. Although he

²⁴Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, Edinburgh: T&T, 1997, 697.

²⁵Cfr. Giuseppe Alberigo, "The Announcement of the Council...", 42.

was not very optimistic about the relations the Catholic Church should have with the Protestants, he proposed the involvement of the Catholic Church in the activities of the World Council of Churches. According to him a Council should aim at the internal renewal of the Catholic Church, a renewal based on Episcopal collegiality, the central place of the Bible, the use of the vernaculars in the liturgy and the Divine Office and the simplification of many elements of ecclesiastical practice.²⁶

Famous French Theologian Y. Congar wrote an article and he was confident that it would be a new Council and not the continuation of Vatican I. He proposed five thematic areas for the consideration of the Council. These include: correcting the doctrinal errors, promoting the spiritual vocation of human beings, promoting the unity of the Church, create new awareness among the clergy on their pastoral commitment and to achieve peace on earth by prohibiting atomic weapons.

Slowly other Christian Churches started showing interest in the Council. The public media triggered some interest in the secularised world and the world was hopeful of radical changes in the modern world with the convocation and conduct of the Council.

Conclusion

Vatican II lasted only for relatively four short sessions from 1962 to 1965. However, it remains as a major religious event of the 20th century. It was an updating, *aggiornamento*, of the Catholic Church.

Ratzinger says:

The Council of Trent would never have been able to exert its impact if it had not been carried by a wave of holiness. The impact of the Second Vatican Council will also depend on whether the Church of the twentieth century renews itself in the spirit of Jesus Christ. The definitive decision on the historical worth of the Second Vatican Council depends on whether people realize in themselves the dream of the testing of chaff and wheat; whether at the end it will be reckoned among the luminous moments of Church history depends on the people who transfer it into life."²⁷

²⁶Giuseppe Alberigo, "The Announcement of the Council..." 23.

²⁷Hubert Jedin, ed., *History of the Church, Vol. X, The Church in the Modern Age*, London, 1981, 151.

The Second Vatican Council was and is still an authentic sign of God for our time, a sign that guarantees that the Church is guided by the Holy Spirit. The renewal, updating, strengthening and empowering of the Church by this conciliar act depend on how we could interpret and accept the Council teachings within the Tradition of the Church and under the reliable guidance of the Magisterium.

I conclude with the words of Prof. Giacomo Martina, who clearly speaks about the necessity of the Second Vatican Council:

The documents are in fact the outcome of a difficult journey, and its extent can only be understood by looking back for a moment to the distant starting point; the historical context of the fifties, with the general atmosphere of society in the immediate post war period, and the contrast between a society in rapid evolution and a Church that in many ways stood immobile in defense of threadbare and outdated positions. We have made a definite move from condemnation to dialogue, from ghetto to presence, from defense of Christianity to the building of a Church that is based on the strength of truth and the effectiveness of grace, a Church that is seen as a reminder, as the guardian of unchanging values even for a society that seems to forget or deny them, as a city built on a high place, as a lamp placed on a lamp stand, as the spring of living water at which all can drink.²⁸

²⁸Giacomo Martina, *The Historical Context*, 56-57.