

The Society of Mary in the Aftermath of Vatican II

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For many Catholics, Vatican II is past history, an initiative that aroused great expectations, but left the Catholic Church in many parts of the world in a debilitated and dysfunctional state. It is history that will give the final judgment on the council's significance. Fortunately, fifty outstanding historians and scholars have already been at work interpreting the council's many-layered process, under the leadership of Giuseppe Alberigo, in a five volume study, *History of Vatican II*.¹

For these historians, Vatican II is more than a moment of legislation; it is an ecclesial event involving antecedents, a decision concerning the Church's future, and an aftermath – coming to terms with this decision. This initiative has had momentous implications for the life of the Church, and because the life of the Society of Mary is symbiotic with the life of the Church at large, we can only understand our Marist experience of recent decades by situating it within the ecclesial event of Vatican II.

Marists in a Church hardly aware of the need for change

The historical record makes it clear that it was the leadership of John XXIII that determined the unprecedented direction taken by the 'pastoral' council he convoked. His was a subtle leadership, easily misunderstood at the time. It was inspired by a sense of history – the recognition that the Church lives in history and renews itself as it 'senses the rhythms of time' (Bulla indictionis, *Humanae salutis*, 25 Dec. 1961).² 'Pope John wanted a council', Alberigo wrote, 'that would mark a transition between two eras, that would bring the Church out of the post-Tridentine period' (Vol. I, p. 42). John's vision was truly prophetic – an inspired recognition of the life-giving relationship between the gospel truth and historical realities. As he was dying he declared: 'It is not the gospel that changes; it is we who are beginning to understand it better. The moment has come to recognise the signs of

¹ *History of Vatican II*, edited by Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak, Leuven, Peeters, Maryknoll, Orbis; volume 1, 1995; volume 2, 1997; volume 3, 2000; volume 4, 2003, volume 5 2006. References in the text are to volume and page of this work. See also my *Historians Bring to Light the Achievement of Vatican II*, *Australasian Catholic Record* 82 (2005) 256-82.

² Cited in Volume I, p. 170; cf. Vol. I, p. 8,12; Vol. III, p. 491.

the times, to seize the opportunities offered, and to look far ahead' (Vol. II, p. 582).

The prevailing ethos of the Church, however, was far from sympathetic with these concerns. Alberigo has described the condition of the Catholic Church on the eve of Vatican II as 'like a besieged fortress of truth ... a condition of apparent strength and substantial weakness' (Vol. I, p. 504). In a work written prior to the *History* he edited, Alberigo pointed out that some of the main problems confronting the Church today 'were already incubating when John summoned the council: problems ranging from the identity of the priest as a sacral figure, to the identification of the sacrament of penance with auricular confession'. 'These were only perceptible symptoms', he continued, 'of a deeper and broader malaise that even Pius XII had sensed, although he diagnosed it as a disease to be suppressed and eliminated, rather than an uneasiness caused by an increasingly intolerable time lag'.³

I can recall life in the Society of Mary, as it shared the outlook Alberigo describes. Although we did not recognise it at the time, an understanding of priestly identity, in the form of a hardy clerical culture, had been a dominant influence in the Church's life for centuries, and it had a subtle influence on our Marist outlook. Although statistical analyses have shown that the decline in 'vocations' had begun before I went to the seminary, they were still numerous, reflecting a climate of renewed optimism and relative affluence in the aftermath of World War II. In a world in which career paths for Catholic youths were limited, the prestigious and influential priestly role offered a rewarding way of life to generous young Catholics. No doubt my experience was typical of the time. The decision which took me to the Marist seminary was a decision to be a **priest**. Why a **Marist**? The Marists who taught me were a happy dedicated band of priests, why not join them? Marist life seemed like a devotional extra added to an essentially priestly career. Much needed to be clarified before I came to appreciate the 'gracious choice' of my Marist calling.

It was probably my own fault that during my novitiate I seemed to learn nothing of the religious life, as a taking up of the magnificent challenge of sharing the ideals of the Poor Man of Nazareth. The main thing I took from the novitiate was the idea that being a good Marist

³ *The Reception of Vatican II*, Washington DC, CUA Press, 1987, p.15.

was ‘keeping the Rule’ (Spiritual Exercises, obtaining necessary permission etc.). I was impressed by the report that one of the recent popes had declared that he would canonise any religious who ‘kept the Rule’ perfectly throughout their lives – impressed but also a bit puzzled, it didn’t seem to make sense.

Australian seminarians of my generation were a zealous lot, the cream of Catholic youth, hungry for a genuine spirituality – sometimes a topic of conversation when we met friends in the crowded diocesan seminary, who complained that throughout their course they had no proper spiritual guidance. Our Marist superior tried to meet our need with weekly conferences on the spiritual life which were sound theologically but not inspiring. He awakened considerable interest, however, when he commented on the recently published work of Jules Grimal, postulator of the Founder’s cause, *History, Evangelical Character and Spirit of the Hidden Life of the Constitutions of the Society of Mary* (1942). Apart from lives of missionaries, it was the only recent Marist publication we were aware of. Clearly Marist studies were in the doldrums. A spirituality nourished by the Scriptures had no place in our awareness. The original, *La Bible de Jerusalem*, which I acquired in Rome in 1954, opened an exciting new stage in my own spiritual journey.

The Church of that time, in its ‘condition of apparent strength and substantial weakness’ as ‘a besieged fortress of truth’, had developed an outlook that was to be criticised in the debates of Vatican II as ‘triumphalism’. Looking back from where we now stand it is clear that a variety of complex historical factors had led to the development of a culture that was strongly reactionary. It found itself *living in a world apart*, no longer sharing fully in the struggles and hopes of humanity’s ongoing history. It had become *excessively institutionalised*. As it looked to *canonical discipline* as the principal means to be used as it pursued its purposes, acceptable theological stances and styles of pastoral practice were excessively constricted, and it gave little attention the great sources of its true vitality, the Scriptures, the sacramental mysteries, and the great heritage of its past history. To many separated Christians, this great Church – which presented itself as a model with which all followers of Christ should identify – seemed a caricature of the ideal Church of God.

Marists in a Church ill-prepared for the challenge of change

Pope John's hope for the council was in fact realised. By a long and tortuous route, it made a decision to leave behind the post-Tridentine era and initiate a new era in the life of the Catholic Church. We must evaluate this decision in a final section, but first we must consider what this transition implied if we are to understand the situation the Society now finds itself in.

The style of Catholicism described in the last section had assumed its final form under a series of popes who chose the name 'Pius'; and it reached its fullest expression in the pontificate of Pius XII: a centralised papal administration that produced a uniformity and stability in the life of the universal Church in many ways without precedent.

At the time of the council few churchmen and theologians recognised the immense practical implications – sociological, cultural, anthropological – of the transition the Church was about to make. Confidence in the effectiveness of canonical discipline was so strong that it was presumed that a 'fiat' of Church authorities was all that was required. The importance of pastoral leadership was not recognised. I understand that when Cardinal Gilroy announced to the clergy of Sydney the introduction of the vernacular liturgy he assured them that, voting as a member of the council, he had not favoured the change. As we now know, these assumptions were soon to be severely tested, confronting the post-Tridentine Church with its spiritual poverty – the apparent strength of its canonical discipline concealed a condition of substantial weakness.

The radical shifts called for if the Church was to inaugurate a new era called for pastoral guidance animated by a genuine evangelical spirit. But the current clerical formation produced administrators of Catholicism's institutionalised system; few pastors, in fact, were comfortable with the role of spiritual guide for their people. This deficiency had a theological dimension of course. Appropriate pastoral leadership called for a theology animated by the inspiring message of the Gospel. The current theological climate, however, saw the Christian life as a struggle against sinfulness, salvation as atonement for the sins of the world – with the momentous significance of the Resurrection almost forgotten. Under the influence of this impoverished theology, the beautiful face of the Church, the beloved Bride of God, had become a 'worrisome' face (G. Lafont).

The ecclesiological vision needed for a sound pastoral leadership was lacking. An outlook which placed its confidence in the Church's institutional greatness had little appreciation of the mystery of solidarity

with the Saviour in his Risen Life. Ecclesiological confusion constantly polarised and frustrated Catholics and their leaders as they sought to resolve the issues faced by the Church.

This confusion is evident in the council's aftermath as it has been analysed by church historians. Hermann Joseph Pottmeyer, describes the first phase of this aftermath as an era of 'excitement', in which simplistic interpretations of the institutional changes called for led at times to a 'levelling down of ecclesial office' which compromised the Church's apostolic constitution. For many, this phase has been followed by a disillusionment and disengagement from the Church. Pottmeyer anticipates that this phase will eventually be followed by a process which brings to light the true fruits of the Council, with the release of new religious and spiritual energies. For Pottmeyer, this final phase, which may last a considerable period, calls for a wise leadership which does not frustrate the work of God's Spirit by an approach which is too cautious.⁴

And what of the Society of Mary in this evolving situation? It was providential that the work initiated by Jean Coste prior to the council had provided Marists with a new confidence in their tradition. But our life had been so influenced by the prevailing ethos that our experience has been little different from that of the Church at large. Confident that we had a viable tradition we tended to bunker down in familiar comfort zones, waiting for good times to come. Beyond the regular publication of 'Mission Statements', we have made no distinctive effort to revive the original Marist project of 'creating a new Church'. Our pastoral style has been little different from the prevailing model. We have done little *as a group* to foster a renewal of Catholic life through an effective fellowship with the laity in our Marist vision - and this at a time when new 'ecclesial movements' (one of which, Focolare, emphasises the Marian profile of the Church as it sets out to build a 'Mariapolis'!) – are a remarkable feature of the contemporary Church. In his Christmas Address to the Curia (1987), John Paul II recommended von Balthasar's ecclesiology 'with a Marian profile' as a counter-balance to the long established ecclesiology with a 'Petrine' profile,⁵ but this lead – so affirming of our Marist approach to ministry – was almost unnoticed by the Marist world. Must we not conclude that Jean-Claude Colin's worst

⁴ *The Reception of Vatican II*, p.33-34.

⁵ *Origins* (28 January 1988), p. 573-576.

fears – that the dynamic blessing given to the Society of Mary at its beginning would be neutered by the prevailing clerical ethos – have to a large extent been realised?

Marists in a Church humbled before the call of the Gospel

If the review we have made is humbling, it should not be discouraging: the failure of human efforts has often led to great things when it brings a true openness to the ways of God.

In 2004, Cardinal Karl Lehmann, Chairman of the German Bishops' conference, criticised the confusion often present in debates concerning the teaching of Vatican II. The council, he declared, 'did not undertake a single initiative of reform', but committed the Church to 'a fundamental willingness to undertake reform'. If the council indicated some signposts pointing the way forward it offered no blueprint for the Church's future – such a blueprint would inevitably reflect the limited theological perspectives of those who framed it. In fact, the future of the Church envisaged by Vatican II (as it called the Church to return to the true sources of its life – the Word of God, the sacramental Mysteries, and common life in Christ) will be shaped by nothing less than the 'mystery' of God's designs, hidden for all ages, and finally revealed in the Incarnate Word of the Father.

It is fascinating to follow the debates of the council as a way was sought that would lead God's people beyond the false securities defended by a determined minority that fought for a maintaining of the status quo. The tide turned against this minority view when the preparatory text on the reform of the liturgy was the only *schema* accepted by the assembly as a working document and soon began to receive overwhelming support. Central to this text was the Saviour's 'Paschal Mystery'. This long forgotten term was not familiar to the bishops, but it caught their imagination, as offering 'something more' than the soteriology of the post-Tridentine outlook.

For the wisdom traditions of the world, this 'mystery' theme taken up by Paul from apocalyptic literature is a very positive one: 'something unapproachable that invites entry; something unknowable that offers true understanding' (P. Gleeson). The historians of Vatican II saw this theme as establishing within the vision of the council the concerns of the renewal movements that had challenged the complacency of the post-Tridentine Church. Commenting on a crucial 'straw vote' that cleared the way for the constitution *Dei verbum*, one of them wrote that the vote 'expressed the council's solidarity with the biblical movement

and the liturgical movement, with a return to the sources that would bring with it a meeting in the Christian mystery' (Jan Grootaers, Vol. II, p. 390).

In fact, all the constitutions gave a central place to the Christian Mystery. It was the theme of *Lumen gentium's* introductory chapter – a theme that unified the rich ecclesiology it proposed. For *Dei verbum*, the salvation history of Christian faith is a series of revelatory encounters with an on-going divine initiative culminating in the Christ-event. *Gaudium et spes* called for a dialogical relationship with the march of human history, inspired by a new confidence in God's designs: 'It is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of human existence becomes clear'. Identifying with the inclusive ways of God, this constitution goes on, in a remarkable statement, to declare that every human existence is caught up in the Saviour's Paschal Mystery; 'in a way known only to God' (no. 22).

Administrative changes in the life of the Church after the council have not brought the renewal promised by Vatican II. With the rest of the Church, we Marists are humbled and led to look beyond such superficial measures for the way to genuine renewal. The great religious traditions that have enriched the life of the Church with their evangelical witness all had their origin in a prophetic grace. Leaders such as Benedict, Francis and Vincent de Paul, for instance, found themselves called to meet the desperate needs of their times by giving a new expression to the Gospel truth of a divine love 'poured out in the world, in Jesus Christ, in the form of human powerlessness' (von Balthasar). Through the prophetic blessings they have received religious traditions are called to make a difference in the life of the people of God. The story of our beloved Society of Mary makes it clear that it had its origin in a prophetic grace such as we have described – a blessing that is astounding in its inspiring depth and simplicity. Today we must recognise that its original dynamism has been lost. Certainly, we *have* made a difference, a difference that is often remarked upon by those we have ministered to, but it is a difference that had been so muted that outsiders do not see us as anxious to share our Marist way with the Church at large.

We face a challenging future. What are we to do? Let us not lose sight of the big picture of our Marist history. Our story is soon to see an astounding development.

The first generation of the Society set off for the world's most remote and precarious mission field. Their faith and courage have borne

substantial fruits – despite difficulties to be expected in the cultural turmoil of developing countries, the Catholic faith and the Marist way have established deep roots. Within a couple of decades the Marists of Oceania will have a leading role in carrying forward the Society's mission. What can the Society as a whole do to help our confreres of Oceania prepare themselves for this responsibility – involving them in planning, and beginning the collaborative initiatives that will be called for? My few experiences working with Marists of Oceania have left me aware how little the achievements of the Society in this region are known by Marists of other provinces. I was surprised to learn, for instance, that ex-patriot missionaries are a diminishing minority in the province; recently ordained Marists I have worked with I have found outstanding in their commitment to the Marist mission in practice; the Marist Training Community, closely associated with the Novitiate at Taveuni, seems to be a successful example of our old ideal of clerical-lay collaboration that deserves to be better known.

What of the short-term future of our established provinces? Morale is important, if we are to be open to the ways the Lord has prepared for us. I have tried to face up to the self-criticism we must make as we pass through a period of unprecedented change. But I have also acknowledged that our ministry has made a difference. A couple of initiatives suggest themselves that can boost Society morale, giving us a legitimate pride in our heritage as we face what lies ahead.

We have all been encouraged at times, when we have learned what people say about our Marist style of ministry. In many provinces, however, our ministries are closing down, and with the passing of time those we have ministered to and collaborated with will be gone. Before it is too late, properly conducted surveys should provide a record of Marist ministry in practice, a valuable complement to the institutional history provided by our Marist historians. Such material will not only boost Society morale; it will provide an inspiring resource for those who carry on the mission of the Society when the Church's present crisis has passed.

Another initiative that would boost morale is a historical study of the remarkable number of religious foundations whose origins have been influenced by association with the Society of Mary – a clear indication

of the prophetic potential of our Marist way⁶. What strikes me most in this is the fact that the association has never been entered into by Marists in a spirit of proprietorship and empire building – something contrary to genuine evangelisation.

Meanwhile, in our old established provinces, let us give ourselves to the promotion of the renewed faith of Vatican II – leading our people to the sources of new life neglected in the past, the Biblical Story, the Sacramental Mysteries filled with the power of the Resurrection, and genuine Community, as disciples of the one Lord. As we do this let us strive more consciously, as a group, to bring into the lives of our people the difference made possible by our Marist way. Waiting for the future that has been prepared for us, let us remember that it is God's future and the 'work of Mary' in a future that belongs to God.

⁶ It is interesting, for instance, to learn that the two women who will probably be the first persons to be canonised in Australia and New Zealand, Blessed Mary McKillop and Suzanne Aubert, were influenced by Marist ideals.