

COMMUNITY

SPIRITUALITY

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Movement for a Better World
January 2003

Vatican II: Council of Renewal

The Church has its origins in the ministry of Jesus himself. It grew out of the community of disciples founded by Jesus to carry on his saving work, and has continued to do this, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit for nearly two thousand years. During that time there has been much development and growth, as the Church has adapted its message to speak to people of different periods of history.

In the recent history of the Church, the key event has been the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). This Council brought about a number of practical and structural changes in Church life, for example, in the celebration of the liturgy, in the greater importance given to the laity, in the setting up of structures like parish councils, which promoted dialogue and shared responsibility. These changes were the expression of a new vision, which the Church had, of itself and of its relationship to the world.

Vatican II has been described as a pastoral Council. The word ‘pastoral’ is often used in contrast to the term ‘doctrinal’. It is true that the Council was not called to settle any controversial points of doctrine, but this does not mean it had nothing to do with doctrine, theology or spirituality. It did not simply concentrate on action, and ignore teaching and spirituality.

In his address at the opening of the Council in October 1962, Pope John XXIII said: ‘The principle aim of this Council is not to discuss any theme of basic Church teaching ... What is required is that this certain and unchangeable teaching, which must be faithfully respected, be deepened and presented in such a way that it can respond to the demands of our time’.

And so it was the ‘pastoral’ concern of the Council that the Gospel or Good News should respond to the needs and questions posed by the modern world, and should relate to and enlighten people’s everyday lives.

This direction of the Council was confirmed by Pope Paul VI when he opened its second session. He spoke of the Council's 'pastoral aim' which he described as a 'higher aim', 'more urgent', and 'at the present moment more beneficial'.

There is therefore no question that the concern of the Second Vatican Council was mainly pastoral. But this did not mean just reorganising or rearranging Church life and practice on the surface level. The deeper need was a complete renewal of the Church's way of being, seeing and acting – a new state of mind. Without this, all the external changes would have no lasting or beneficial effect, and there could be no effective pastoral care adapted to today's world.

A "New" Spirituality

As the Council progressed through its four sessions, the conviction grew of the need for a new outlook on the world, a new frame of mind, a new self awareness, a renewed sense of mission, a new style of living

with the world. In a word, a new spirituality.

One of the more serious and recurring errors in the history of Christianity is that spirituality is a purely private, interior matter that concerns the individual person's relationship with God. It is much more than that. Pope Paul VI, when opening the second session of Vatican II (September 1963), called the Church to a renewed and deepened awareness of itself.

'It is clear,' he said, that the Church must 'be reformed and correct itself, trying hard to conform once again to its divine model'. This, he said, is the Church's 'fundamental duty'.

One important way of expressing this new self-awareness would be the way the Church related to other Christians. Pope Paul said that this gave the Council 'its spiritual drama'. The Council, he said, aimed at an ecumenism, which seeks to be total and universal'.

He extended this attitude to embrace dialogue with the world at large: 'The Council will try to

build a bridge towards the contemporary world This Council is characterised by love, the love that thinks of others even before self, the universal love of Christ!’

What the Pope was talking about was the spirituality of the Church, a spirituality which each and every Catholic must make his or her own. It is a far cry from that idea of spirituality as a purely personal, private encounter with God, to the exclusion of all others.

The Second Vatican Council was a pastoral Council, but deep down it was concerned with attitudes, fundamental choices, and giving meaning to one’s life. It went beyond pastoral care as action, to the question of the sense and meaning of that action. In challenging the Church to a new self-awareness and self-evaluation, Pope Paul was asking it to look not just at what it does, but also at the fundamental attitudes and choices that cause it to do what it does.

When we say that the Pope was talking about spirituality, we simply mean that he was

concerned with the kind of outlook that makes a person see things and live in a certain way.

Pastoral Action and Spirituality

This same shift of emphasis, from pastoral action to spirituality, is the kind of journey that every parish and diocese should be undertaking. This does not mean that we ignore pastoral action, but that we recognise that pastoral action needs an underlying spirituality.

A parish may have introduced all the necessary ‘changes’ in liturgy and pastoral practice some time ago, but can we be sure that there has been a corresponding change in peoples’ attitude and frame of mind? It is by no means certain that all parishioners have adopted a new spirituality. A parish council may operate in the same way the parish priest did before the Council. So what has to change? What is the new spirituality?

In 1965, just before the end of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI said: “the religion of our Council has been, first and foremost, charity

.... The ancient story of the Good Samaritan has been the paradigm of the Council's spirituality.'

In other words, the spirituality of the Church is a spirituality of service to humanity. Following the example of the Good Samaritan, it requires that all the Church's resources, energy and riches be used for this service. The answer to the question 'Who is my neighbour?' is 'anyone and everyone'. The source of this attitude is the mystery of love and communion we find in the Trinity.

Here we come to the heart of the spirituality of Church that Vatican II proposed to us: service to humanity is the service of communion, fellowship and love among all people and with God. Such a service must be community centred, and the Council emphasised the importance of the local church (the diocese) as the first experience of this service to the community.

To be faithful to the spirituality of Vatican II, the Church must show the following features:

1. **Dialogue:** The opportunity for all the people to express their views, and feel they have the chance to participate in the life of the Church in a meaningful way.
2. **Discernment:** Looking at the reality of life, and applying to life situations the message of the Gospel. In all our planning and decision-making, we try to act in harmony with the will of God.
3. **On-going Conversion:** Growth takes place in stages, not all at once. On the journey, there will be adaptation and reconciliation. The Church is aware of its limitations, but must not be afraid to be a witness.
4. **Living in Hope:** We read the signs of the times, the significant events on the local and world level. The Church is capable of taking the necessary steps toward change. This is a prophetic Church, which expresses its hope in a process of pastoral planning.

5. Liturgy and Community

Prayer: Our community celebrates its life in worship and prayer. This builds us up and helps us to grow in communion.

This is the spirituality we are all called to live. It is ‘new’, because its subject is not each individual person, but the whole community. We are “the people of God” not a collection of individuals. All other “spiritualities” in the Church must see themselves as subordinate to this basic communitarian spirituality, which is what the New Testament invites, requests and demands.

Spirituality: Overlooked and Under-Estimated

Experience has shown that on the political level, groups whose members have manifested a purely materialistic outlook on life eventually have to face up to the need to show more interest in spiritual values. They come to realise that they have underestimated this dimension of the human person at their peril and have to suffer the consequences of this.

We see political parties frustrated because they have not been able to put into action the values which attracted their members into politics in the first place. Parties, trade unions and other social groups grow weak and pay the price for not paying sufficient attention to something that could have been a source of power and energy for their members.

Issues involving human rights and human dignity stir up enormous emotional reactions among people. Mass demonstrations reveal a deep sense of dissatisfaction with society and with those who govern.

We live in a world of contrast and ambivalence. In our “western” society, we can find in supermarkets everything imaginable to satisfy our material needs. We can ride a bicycle to exercise without leaving our rooms. We can open or close a garage door without a key and without getting out of the car. We can now do our shopping from the computer and who can imagine what further benefits science and technology will

provide for us in the future? And yet, it is apparent that this abundance of consumer goods goes hand in hand with increasing signs of deep dissatisfaction.

When we look at things from within the Church, we often get the impression of a spiritual vacuum. Apostolic workers feel a tiredness because of the poor response to their initiatives and best efforts. They are disheartened by the prevailing indifference which they encounter, hurt by the criticism they often have to bear, and demoralised by what they feel as rejection.

However, if we can rise above these short-term negative emotional responses, and reflect more deeply on the “signs of the times”, we can find numerous signs of people searching for the meaning of life, and striving to find the ingredients that will nourish hope. People are seeking new and decisive directions for personal and collective involvement, to enable them to help make the world more “human”.

There is a collective aspiration to progress toward a common ethic, built on values of equality, participation, dialogue and shared responsibility. These aspirations can be found on different levels: relations between individuals, relationships between whole peoples and nations, and our relationship with nature and the environment.

There is a growing feeling that we need to find forms of spirituality which can respond to these needs of today. Certainly we need to have a greater awareness of the fragility of humanity and its limitations. We need to develop a sense of relationships that is seen as openness to one another, and openness to transcendence, a power higher than ourselves. This search for a spirituality and an ethic has to be universal, so that the whole human family can live together in true friendship.

Religion And Spirituality

In his encyclical letter *Ecclesiam Suam*, Pope Paul VI defined religion as “a relationship between God and man (men and women).” Each religion

presupposes a vision of God and humanity, and requires a certain way of living. Attitudes are proposed to believers, which are based on how God and God's will are perceived.

It is at this level that we find spirituality, the essence of a person or group's identity. It is the point where vision and values come together and flow into a style of life. For us Christians, this identity is determined by our openness and fidelity to the Spirit who, we believe, will lead us to the fullness of truth. (John 16:13)

At this time in human history, when there is such rapid, profound and universal change, more serious questions are being asked than ever before. Are the world's religions up to the task of answering them?

We live in a world that tends towards unification, but suffers from not finding the right ways to attain it. Religion does not seem to offer much help to most of our contemporaries. If they look to religion, they see people who are divided, even within the same tradition or denomination. They

see strained relationships between the leaders and ordinary believers.

They see believers who often display little fidelity to their own religious tradition, and are often ignorant or distrustful of people of other denominations who live alongside them. Believers can easily lose confidence, because they feel marginalised or irrelevant in a society that wants to be organised without any reference to religion or even to God.

In the same religious tradition the searcher will find some who have "watered down" their religion, and others who have become more rigid. In a society of continual change and with so many questions, a "watered-down" religion offers no real help. It provides no criteria to help people discover a true way forward, little motivation for joining with others in trying to find answers to the challenges of the time, and no strength to persevere in the desire to find meaning in life. There is a real danger of ending up, under the pretence of tolerance, with the idea that "everything is valid," or

even worse, that “nothing is worthwhile.”

At the other end of the scale when a religion becomes rigid and distances itself from humanity, we have fundamentalism. Those who follow this line will want to impose on all their own vision of things and style of behaviour, which they consider the only way that is true to the principles of the religion. They offer the same old inflexible answers to new questions. This approach will never satisfy or convince people who are aware and critical. Fundamentalism becomes a closed circle, made up of those prone to fanaticism.

So we have the disturbing situation, where a large part of humanity professes some religious belief, but so many have no answer to the question of the meaning of life. They are unable to respond adequately to the challenges of interpersonal or international relationships, or to our human responsibility towards creation as the inheritance of future generations.

I apologise for such a negative assessment of the ‘status quo’ and obviously we cannot rest there. We have to ask what specific contribution we as Christians can and should make to this huge problem. How can our Christian faith offer a spirituality which can help humanity with its modern questions? What are the main features of a Christian spirituality that can enable humanity to be open towards its future?

There are two important features essential to such a spirituality: the need to read the signs of the times, and our vocation to community. They are not the only ones, but they do allow us to approach with more confidence and effectiveness the issues our world is facing today.

Signs Of The Times

We have had a shocking reminder of just how unstable and dangerous our world environment is, in the events of September 11th, 2001. How do we as Christians react? With fear and anxiety? That would be the normal reaction, without Christ. But we Christians must always be

people of hope, clinging to our faith in the promise of Jesus that, despite all the evidence to the contrary, God's kingdom of justice, love and peace is coming ever closer.

The questions raised above become even more pressing in the light of recent events. How does our Christian faith offer a spirituality that can help humanity with its modern questions and problems? What are the main features of a Christian spirituality that can enable humanity to be open (and hopeful) to the future?

The first thing that is essential to such a spirituality is the need to read the signs of the times. This expression, popularised by Pope John XXIII at the beginning of Vatican II, comes from St Matthew's Gospel (16:2-3) where Jesus says to his critics who ask him to produce a sign from heaven to prove his credentials: 'In the evening, you say 'It will be fine; there's a red sky', and in the morning, 'Stormy weather today; the sky is red and overcast'. You know how to read the face of the sky, but you

cannot read the signs of the times'.

These words are not just an appeal to recognise Jesus as the fulfilment of the messianic prophecies. They also represent the basis of what our Christian attitude must be toward history and current events.

The expression 'signs of the times' has about it the sound of good news, of 'hope for better times for the Church and for humanity' (John XXIII, *Humanae Salutis*, 4). Then in his famous encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, the same Pope described the signs of the times as the manifestation of gospel values at work within history, and translated into great hopes for humanity.

The Council's *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*) is really an invitation to us to select from so many events the ones that are full of meaning. These events, even though they may be ambivalent, can be seen as characteristic of the age, and charged with power for the future. In and through these events, something of the

future is beginning now to take shape.

Such discernment reveals the possibility of these historical events being the expression of the great hopes of humanity surfacing in our collective conscience. These events enable us to see what goals humanity is moving towards. In all this, we seek to discover traces of the liberating power of the Gospel, and the challenges that these events pose for us as they move us into action.

This distinctive feature of spirituality allows us to develop the meaning that we give to life – our own life and that of the world. We are urged to make contact with reality and to dialogue with others. We are encouraged to sympathise with whatever spark of life and love we find in these events, and as a result of our dialogue, to act together with others.

Pope Paul VI had this in mind when he wrote ‘Wherever people are trying to understand themselves and the world, we can communicate with them. Wherever the councils of nations

come together to establish the rights and duties of humanity, we are honoured when they allow us to take our seat among them. We are not civilisation but we promote it’ (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 97-98)

According to this point of view, it is not so much that the world is the recipient of a saving message, which the Church has in its possession and maintains in eternal purity. Rather, the world is seen as the place where the Church is called to look for the signs of God’s presence, by engaging in dialogue with all.

Human history and salvation history are not separate, do not exist in parallel, and are not in opposition. The plan of salvation, which Christ has manifested to us, is meant to be realised in the one, single history of humanity. For Christians who read them in the light of the Gospel, the events, which express people’s deepest hopes, are the manifestation of the will of God. The result will be that people feel more motivated to walk side by side with one another, helping one another to discern whatever

calls them to act together for the common good.

Called to Fuller Communion

Marcos Aruda, a member of the United Nations Programme for Development, speaks about the globalisation of the human conscience. He sees it as something that corresponds to a natural tendency in all human beings. It is an all-embracing movement, which both personalises and socialises. In the process of globalisation, people must not surrender their individual personalities. Human development is possible, only if each person is capable of reflection.

Aruda argues that the condition for humanity to grow spiritually is that, in the process of development, people come closer together. He refers to Teilhard de Chardin when he describes this coming together not by external force, but by an attraction from within; not by coercion **nor** by subordination to a common task, but by unanimity and by communion in the one spirit.

It is in this process that the Church can and must be a leader, not a follower. We have the basis of authentic Christian spirituality, which we know as communion, in those words which were the central part of the prayer of Jesus on the eve of his death: “May they all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you” (John 17:21). At the conclusion of the second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI said: “The Lord, through the Council, has again called on his Church to place unity at the centre of its life” (Dec 7, 1965).

Globalisation and inter-dependence are unstoppable forces in our modern world. The Pauline Hansons of this world, and those who think like her, are understandably anxious and would wish it otherwise, but it is not to be. The Gospel spirituality of communion will help us relate to, and play a leading part in, this march towards unification. The gospel of Jesus Christ opens out to a truly universal communion.

For the last 500 years, the prevailing spirituality in the Church has been one of journeying towards individual

holiness. The need now is to develop a spirituality of relationships. This 'new' spirituality has as its subject not each individual in isolation but the community as a whole. It is only this communitarian spirituality that can empower the Church to play a leading role in the transformation of the world.

(Adapted from "Community and Spirituality – Church in the World of Today: Movement for a Better World").