Vatican II and Adaptation

In a similar manner, the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965 CE) represents a dual-focused effort on the part of the Church to adapt and reform itself so as to discover ways and means to remain steadfast to its Christ-given mission and faithful to the Gospel values of which it is the custodian, proclaimer, and witness. Therefore, at Vatican II, the Church engaged in a plethora of wide-ranging *ad intra* reforms (sacramental reforms, hierarchical reforms, missiological and evangelical reforms, etc.) intended to edify the inner life of the Church in ways that would, in turn, eventuate in the Church’s improved ability to respond to, address, and shed the light of the Gospel unto the *ad extra* changes occurring and developments unfolding in the wider secular world beyond the Church proper. In short, like Saint Leo, the Church undertook *ad intra* reforms with the ultimate aim and purpose of adapting and edifying itself so that it could be better able to pastorally respond to the needs, circumstances, and situations of a rapidly evolving world in a manner and via ways and means that enabled the Church to more effectively and convincingly convey in modern times the ongoing meaning, significance, value, and vitality of the Gospel.

One is not able to fully appreciate the nature of adaptations and reforms undertaken by the Second Vatican Council devoid of an understanding of ecclesiologies which dominantly prevailed in the life of the Church in the centuries prior to the Council. Hence, what we have considered in the course up to this point ought to serve as a backdrop and sounding board for our consideration and assessment of the ecclesiology of Vatican II. Additionally, one is also not able to fully appreciate the ecclesiology of Vatican II devoid of an appreciation for the vision of the Council proffered by the pope who convened the Council, John XXIII.

Pope John XXIII called for the Council on January 25, 1959 CE (just 90 days after he succeeded Pius XII). The Pope maintained that he was motivated:

> solely by the concern for the good of souls and in order that the new pontificate may come to grips, in a clear and well defined way, with the spiritual needs of the present time.

The announcement was received coolly by most cardinals, for Roncalli had been elected pope on October 28, 1958 CE, with the expectation that he would be a transitional pope; i.e., one who would enjoy a short term and heal the traumas of Pius XII’s long reign. Furthermore, the Pope’s language was definitive and final; he had made up his mind and did not feel obliged to consult with the cardinals. The convening of the Council seems to be, in large part, the doings of John XXIII.

Roncalli had served as papal delegate in Istanbul and Athens between 1935 and 1944 CE, opening him to ecumenism. The devastating wake of World War II fashioned his intense pastoral outlook, hence, the origin of the two aims of the Council: 1) pastoral engagement with the world and 2) Catholic commitment to ecumenism. The broad range of these aims and the lack of precision regarding “matters of faith and morals,” as well as the absence of condemnations of errors, caused many to ponder the nature of the Council; it clearly was not to be a continuation of the 1870 CE Council, nor was it being convened to address any particular heresy or schism as with past councils.
In the same January announcement, the Pope linked the Council with the theme of renewal. John believed that the Church was at the threshold of an extraordinarily important historical juncture in which it would be necessary:

*to define clearly and distinguish between what is sacred in principle and eternal gospel and what belongs rather to the changing times.*

The Pope viewed the current situation as a time in which the Church was entering an age of universal mission, or crossing the line into a new age; therefore, it would be necessary for the Church to be able to discern the sign of the times and be able to recommend how the message of Jesus addresses them. Karl Rahner, S. J., the foremost theologian of the past century, viewed the Council as the third great epoch-changing moment in the life of the Church, on par with the decision of the Church to reach out to Gentiles (and the subsequent Constantinian Revolution) and the Protestant Reformation. Pope John viewed the Church to be on the threshold of a new epoch, much like that in the wake of Trent:

*The historical circumstances are different from those four hundred years ago, but the moment is no less serious for the Church and for the salvation of the world.*

Furthermore, John XXIII saw the world on the threshold of a new era; secular transformations had brought both technological advancements as well as dangers, particularly the threat of the loss of all sense of the spiritual because moral progress had not kept pace with material progress, which lent to a feeling of human independence from God.

*The Church today is witnessing a crisis underway in society. While humanity is at the turning point of a new age, tasks of immense seriousness and size await the Church.*

However, it must be noted that such a dire forecast of the modern world did not lead the Pope to despair or cynicism, but rather it served to fortify his faith in Christ and the Spirit to utilize the Church to feel the rhythm of the time.

*We like to reaffirm our confidence in the Savior who has not left this world which He redeemed. Indeed, we make our own recommendation of Jesus that we know how to distinguish the signs of the times; and we seem to see now, in the midst of so much darkness, more than a few indications that augur well for the fate of the Church and of humanity.*

The pope saw the evils and threats of the century as leading people toward more thoughtful and more spiritual values, more eager to work for human integration; thus, people were open to the Church’s teachings.

*In the face of this twofold spectacle—a world which reveals a grave state of spiritual need and the Church of Christ, still so vibrant with vitality—we felt at once the urgent duty to call our family together in order to enable the Church to contribute more effectively to the solution of the problems of the modern age.*
We expect great things indeed from this Council, which wishes to reinvigorate faith, doctrine, Church discipline, religious and spiritual life; we also expect it to make a great contribution to the reaffirmation of those principles of the Christian order which also inspire and govern developments in civic, economic, political and social life.

John XXIII envisioned *ad intra* reform of the Church as the means toward the *ad extra* redemption of the modern world. This is why he was so adamant regarding the Council’s pastoral character.

*The Council will expand the scope of charity to meet the varied needs of peoples and will present the message of Christ to them in a clearer way.*

In short, Pope John envisioned the Council to be a transition between eras in the life of the Church, an ushering in of a new phase of proclamation and witness. The trick was discerning elements of tradition that were abiding and capable of nourishing such a transition.

The Pope often referred to “flashes of heavenly light” which illuminated his vision of the Council and as it drew nearer he was fond of referring to it as a “New Pentecost!” The Pope came to play on the juxtapositioning to Pentecost deliberately for he understood well how it communicated his belief about the exceptional character of the current historical juncture in the life of Church; extraordinary prospects lay ahead of the Church and, consequently, the Church had to renew itself so that it, like the early apostles, would be able to present and explain the Gospel message to the world. The allusion to Pentecost also served to place the Holy Spirit at the center of the Conciliar event.

*Read Acts 2 and reflect upon the original Pentecost.*

To appreciate Pope John’s view of the Council as a New Pentecost, it is helpful to recall the original Pentecost as a recording in the second chapter of the Book of Acts. Acts presents the disciples gathered around Mary (collectively representing the Church) locked in an attic in hiding having retreated from the world in fear in the aftermath of Jesus’ crucifixion. The Risen Jesus appears to them and breathes the gift of the Holy Spirit unto them. Subsequent to receiving the Holy Spirit, the apostles (Church) are empowered to go forth to the outside world to continue to the redemptive and salvific mission of Jesus. Upon their exiting the attic, the apostles are confronted by a large and cosmopolitan crowd comprised of peoples from multiple nationalities who speak a variety of languages (representing the world).

Guided by the Spirit, the apostles evangelize and all who are present are able to understand their Gospel message (an undoing of the Babel episode). So, too, perhaps this is what Pope John XXIII had in mind for the contemporary church: the Church, empowered anew by the Holy Spirit, emerging from its withdrawal/retreat from the modern world and going forth to engage all peoples, from all nations, of all languages and presenting them with the redemptive and salvific message of the Gospel.

Pope John XXIII coined a phrase which succinctly summarizes the fundamental project of the Council—*aggiornamento*—updating, adapting, renewing, “spring cleaning.” The idea behind *aggiornamento* is the belief that if the Church is to successfully speak to the world, then it would have to speak to it in a manner that was intelligible to it. For Pope John this had direct ecclesiological implications; rather than demanding that the world conform itself to a metaphysical blueprint proffered by the Church, the Church was to adapt and modify itself so that it could make the Gospel meaningful to all persons of the world given their
particular cultural contexts. Standing in the midst of the world, the Church stands to learn from the plurality of peoples, political structures, economic systems, sociological realities, etc., which color and shape human existence.

See Gaudium et Spes #’s 4, 21, 24, 27, 40, 42, 44, 53, 58, 74, and 78, Lumen Gentium #’s 3, 5, 7, 8, 23, and 25, and Unitatis Redintegration #6.

By embracing the world in such a radical way, the Pope was attesting to the fact that the world shares in the process of salvation. Salvation is no longer understood as a phenomenon to be worked strictly ad intra the Church. The world, too, shares in the process of salvation. For believers, this means that there can be no opposition between our religious life and our social life. For it is in our social existence that we are called to communicate Christ to the world—this is how the Church serves as a sacrament of Christ.

See Lumen Gentium #’s 1, 3, 5, 8, 9, and 48, Gaudium et Spes #’s 21, 24, 27, 39, 42, 43, 45, and 62, and Sacrosanctum Concilium #’s 2, 5, 26.

If a dichotomy does exist between these two dimensions of our life, then we fail to be church and we contribute to the demise of the world.

See Gaudium et Spes #19! and 43 and Lumen Gentium #31.