

Vatican III? An Asian Vision of Catholic Reformation in the 3rd Millennium

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It is said that a proper understanding of history allows us to appreciate the gift of the present and the promise of the future. In a very real sense, history is *prophecy*.

The present article appears prophetic indeed. Let me explain briefly the history of its title.

From May 29 to June 1, 1977, a Conference attended by theologians and social scientists was held at Notre Dame University in Indiana, U.S.A., with the theme: "*Towards Vatican III: The Work That Needs to Be Done*." The participants were all well-known theologians and social scientists, like Edward Schillebeeckx, David Tracy, Johann Metz, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Andrew Greeley, Hans Kung, Avery Dulles, Charles Curran, to name a few.

The organizers stressed that the Conference was not designed "to be a call for Vatican III." In fact, the term *Vatican III* was seen by the participants only as a *symbol* of the *next critical turning point* in the Church. With this understanding, the participants were supposed to articulate "not the present and immediately past questions which face the Church today ... but the new questions which should occupy (the) scholarly concerns in the years ahead." The aim of that Conference was *to identify emerging theological themes*.

Today we are supposed to be more visionary than reactionary.

The proceedings of that 1977 Conference are contained in the book with the same title, edited by David Tracy, Hans Küng, and Johann Metz, published in 1978.

The writing of this article was triggered by a very interesting remark made by Johann Metz in that 1977 Conference. He said that the colloquium was a sign that theological *dialogue* "which was in the past a European monologue camouflaged as a dialogue" is becoming a "*trialogue*." It was an admission that, in the past, theology was more a product of European monologue than a real dialogue with the theologians from the rest of the world. The Conference had the intention to achieve, not only a dialogue, but a *trialogue* between European, North American, and as Metz called them, *Third World Christians*.

After reading the book, however, it is obvious that the *trialogue* remained a good intention.

All the participants were from North America and Europe, except perhaps Gustavo Gutierrez, the representative of the "Third World Christians" whose contribution to the Conference, if indeed there was, was not even included in the book.

Twenty-four years have elapsed since that Conference. Very little was heard from it. I asked myself: What would have happened if the envisioned *trialogue* came true? What if an Asian were invited to it? What would he have told them? Would they have listened to him? It is these presumptuous questions that led me to write these pages.

If an Asian were invited to attend a *trialogue* on the future of the Church, what would be his/her concerns which his European and North American counterparts must hear? European and North American theologians have very valid viewpoints concerning the future of the Church, but these would be terribly incomplete without the insights of those who are sometimes unfairly lumped together as *Third World Christians*. If a Vatican III or a Council dealing with global reform of the Church were to be held, what reforms would an Asian want to be included in their discussion? But first, the attendant questions:

Will There Be a Catholic Reformation in the Near Future?

Even if there were no Ecumenical Council, modeled after Vatican II, in the foreseeable future, believe it or not, the Church is presently undergoing a reformation. Reformation is so fundamental to, and co-extensive with, the life of the Church that the *Textus emendatus* of the proposed Fundamental Law of the Church (1971) had even acknowledged it (can. 2, art. 4).

By its very nature, the Church as a living organism is *semper reformanda*. The never-bridged distance between what the Church is and what the Church *ought to be* impels all reform movements. As Yves Congar wrote: "There is no ecclesiology which does not have to assume as a statutory fact the irreducible duality of that which exists in fact and that which ought to exist."

The source of this duality is two-fold: first, the fact that the historical Church is composed of sinners; and second, the fact that the Holy Spirit continually moves the Church in history towards its eschatological perfection. The former is a constant theme in moral-spiritual theology, as well as in the liturgy. *Intus reformari*, *metanoia*, and *sequela Christi*, although with strong personalistic and individualistic dimensions, are reform concepts that apply to the Church as well.

The picture of Pope John Paul II opening the doors of St. Peter's Basilica during the inauguration of the Jubilee Year is still fresh in our mind. For me, it was reminiscent of the opening of the doors of the Vatican when Pope John XXIII declared his intention to call the Second Vatican Council. Both these actions manifested a courageous and evangelical intent towards reform. Both these actions symbolized the Church's need to listen to the call for *metanoia* (conversion), a recognition of its status as *intus reformari* (in need of interior change), and its commitment to a more intense *sequela Christi* (following of Christ).

The sayings of our Lord concerning the unworthy servants (Lk.17.10), the salt of the earth that loses its taste and is no longer good for anything except to be trodden underfoot by men (Mt. 5:13), the necessity of taking up one's cross and following Christ (Mk 8:34), the inevitability of death if the grain of wheat is to bear fruit (Jn 12:24) and the hatred of one's own life (Jn 12:25), have in the past been primarily and often exclusively, to individual Christians. These sayings must also, and perhaps, primarily, be understood as directed to whole Church. These sayings remind the Church of the ever-present demand for reform. For, if she is to faithfully follow Christ, she must be ready to give up everything that she thought is indispensable, in order to walk in poverty and utter dependence on Christ. This is what the threefold concept of *metanoia*, *intus reformari*, and *sequela Christi* as applied to the Church is all about.

Such reformation is, however, not only the result of personal or institutional initiative or resolve. The inward principle of reform in

the Church is the Holy Spirit. It is the initiative of the Holy Spirit that gives birth to it, and it is through the Spirit's inspiration and guidance that the reform is brought to completion. In realizing this work, the Holy Spirit appears as pure grace and liberty. Perhaps, one of the most remarkable contributions of the Protestant Reformation is our intense awareness of the existence of a defective reform theory where the Holy Spirit is tied down to the established hierarchical, sacramental, or magisterial institution. As history has shown, the Holy Spirit can inspire the Church to go beyond mere revision of established forms, or beyond the level of adaptation or *aggiornamento*, in order to effect a radical change in the Church.

Of course, such a "radical change" must be understood properly. As Pope John Paul himself wrote: "To interpret the Second Vatican Council on the supposition that it marks a break with the past, when in reality it stands in continuity with the faith of all times, is a mistake."

Yves Congar expressed the same sentiment in these words: "[True reform must enable us] to transmit in new forms the same faith, the same Eucharist, and the same prayer, the same ministry that the Church received and by which it has been constituted from the start... In order to make this *paradosis* – the transmission – effective and authentic, this or that form in which the transmission occurred in the past, but which would nowadays be an obstacle to its reality, must eventually be revised. This requires the analysis of the situation and its demands, but also knowledge of the indefeasible content of Christian realities which are to be handed on." In short, reformation, even if it results in radical changes, must preserve and protect what is essential to the faith.

To conclude: *Will there be a Vatican III?* If we take it literally to be an Ecumenical Council in the mold of Vatican III then only the Pope or his successors can answer that definitively. However, if we take Vatican III as a *symbol* of the fact that the Church is *semper reformanda*, and is always at a *critical turning point* because its historical nature literally begs for reform, then I would say that Vatican III is underway.

In What Concrete Ways Will Vatican III Happen?

I envision it to occur in two ways, namely, as *renewal* and as *self-criticism*.

In the past, Church reform was thought of as the correction of a litany of abuses, serious ills, and grave indiscretions. This is an unfortunate result of the identification of reformation with *Protestant Reformation*. In this context, reformation brings to the fore worldly prelates, ignorant and unworthy priests and religious superstitious and indifferent laity, and objectionable church practices like the selling of indulgences and buying of church offices. It is not surprising, therefore, to see some Church quarters reacting violently to the idea of a "Vatican III." They assume that holding such a council would unnecessarily focus the attention of the world to grave abuses and serious defects to be corrected.

Reformation as Renewal

But even Luther himself did not use the word "Reformation" in the exclusive sense of correction of abuses. Rather, it meant a going back to the origins, a starting over. Reformation is a *renovatio*, a renewal of spirit and church structures. In other words, when we speak of the reformation of the Church, we do not simply focus on what needs to be corrected; rather we concentrate on something more positive: *the continuing search for a more vital and relevant expressions of Christian faith and practice*. It was in this spirit that Pope John XXIII convened the historic Vatican II whose aim he described as, optimally, both a renewal of the pastoral structures of the Church, and a renewal of faith and Christian life.

Why structures? Is not an inward change sufficient for reformation? The Church, as we know, is not only a spiritual entity. It is an institution. Even if many Catholics are allergic to that term, we have to admit that the Church which Christ established is an institution. And institutions, as Yves Congar described them, have "weight, density and permanence." Purely spiritual reform may have an impact on institutions, but it is not sufficient. Just as institutions have weight, density, and permanence, so the most fervent intentions and strategies for spiritual reform must reach a certain density, weight and permanence. In short, they must be institutionalized, otherwise, they would just exhaust themselves as they confront deeply imbedded structures.

Reformation as Self-Criticism

In his address to the *Conference on the Implementation of Vatican II*, held in Rome from February 25 to February 27, 2000, John Paul II

declared: "In order to mark the first 20 years of Vatican II, I convoked an Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in 1985. Its goal was to celebrate, examine, and further the Council's teachings. In their analysis, the Bishops spoke of the "lights and shadows" that had marked the post-conciliar period. For this reason, I wrote in the Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente* that 'an examination of conscience must also consider the reception given to the Council' (no. 36)." This clearly connects the review of Vatican II with one point of the agenda of the Pope for the Jubilee Year, which was self-criticism, an ecclesial *mea culpa* which he concretely dramatized with his personal act of asking for forgiveness.

Pope John Paul II, by asking for forgiveness in the name of the Church, presented to us a revolutionary model of the Church undergoing reform. Gone is the image of the triumphalist and crusading Church who was out to reform the world, and put back to the right path its erring members. It is rather the image of a Church on pilgrimage, claiming responsibility and atoning for the ills of humanity, a Church bearing the cross which she herself has fashioned, sharing in the infamy and condemnation of which all of humankind is guilty.

In this regard, if reformation is to take the form of self-criticism, the demand for the institutionalization of criticism within in the Church is a necessity. As of now, serious questioning or discussions, once they touch on ecclesiastical structures that have developed through the centuries, are considered irreverent and rebellious. Making criticism a part of the reform of the Church would allow for the possibility that these questionings are not simply symptoms of rebelliousness, but impulses containing the promise of valid innovations. This brings us to the next question:

Who Will Initiate Catholic Reformation?

The initiative for reform can arise either from the hierarchy or from those outside of it, even from the grassroots. Both can occur simultaneously, or one can precede and lead to the other. In the 11th century, for instance, there was the *Gregorian Reform* which occurred simultaneously with the *Cluniac Reform*. The Reform of the religious life which gave birth to the Mendicant Orders in the 13th century, the movement of the *Friends of God* in the second half of the 14th century, the reform instigated by the *Devotio Moderna* and the *Brothers of the Common Life* in the latter part of the same century, and the reform

movement started by *Savonarola* in the latter part of the 15th century: all these reform movements occurred outside the hierarchy, but these led eventually to the Protestant reformation, and the official Catholic reformation brought about by the Council of Trent.

In our contemporary times, we see several initiatives for reform mostly coming from the grassroots level. The mushrooming new religious movements, mostly lay in origin and focus, are certainly reminding the Church, not only of the need for renewal in the traditional forms of religious life, but also in the traditional and officially-sanctioned models of worship and ministry. While some of these movements remain in mainstream Catholicism, many are on the verge of falling away from it, while some have already expressed an outright break from anything that links them with the Catholic Church.

It is no longer sufficient to assume the "let's wait and see" attitude towards these movements. History has shown us that even in spontaneous reform processes occurring in the grassroot level, the Holy Spirit is at work, and even developments which are not comprehended in an official Council can constitute authentic Church reform. More concretely, there were developments in the Church which ultimately produced universally effective results, but without official approval from the magisterium.

Yves Congar wrote that Vatican II is a reform that was made from above. He called it a *fairly unusual phenomenon* because it was not prepared from below. Regional synods followed, rather than preceded the Council Vatican I, on the other hand, far less innovatory, was preceded by several local councils which were for their part scarcely innovatory at all.

But even if Vatican II was initiated from above, the major reforms of the Council were hardly desired or intended by those planning it at the top. As a matter of fact, the most significant reforms, according to Adrian Hastings, were approved not because of a previous papal backing, or majority support, but rather because of the effective and convincing dynamism of a minority: a relatively small number of bishops and their supporting theologians coming principally from a rather limited number of local churches. Their advocacy turned into an overwhelming ecclesial consensus.

What history also shows us is, reform arising from the community has more prospects of being creative, but it runs the risk of re-

maining non-binding and diffuse. Those who initiate such reforms, when ignored or sneered at by those who are supposed to nurture them, usually end up as openly antagonistic, even; schismatic, towards the Catholic Church. Today, in the absence of an official call for global reform, the Church is in a kind of creatively diffuse phase of reform, with lay people taking the lead, with all the chances and risks that that entails.

Why an Asian Perspective in Envisioning Vatican III?

The answer is: Why not? If the future of the Church is in Asia, it is about time that Asian voices resounded in any *dialogue* or *trialogue* about the Church's future.

In terms of numbers, Asians are visibly preponderant in the Church. In a very recent article in *Boletín Eclesiástico de Filipinas*, James Kroeger, MM, gave these challenging mission statistics:

"Asia is the most populated continent, 40% of such population being below 15 years of age... There are 30 megacities in Asia with populations ranging from 5 to 20 million ... China's population exceeds one billion and that of India is predicted to cross the one billion mark in the year 2000... The Church in Asia continues to grow. In 1988 there were 84.3 million Catholics; by 1997 they had reached 105 million. The number of priests rose from 27,700 to 32,291 during the 1988-1997 period. Asian seminarians increased from 19,090 to 25,842 in this same period... In 1997, Asia had 617 out of the 4,420 bishops in the world.... In Asia, Catholics represent only 2.9% of the nearly 3.5 billion Asians. And quite significantly, 50% of All Asian Catholics are in the Philippines."

We should not only revel in those statistics. Numerical preponderance may only mean visibility. *Visibility does not always translate into presence*, especially a presence that makes a difference. Does the Asian presence count in the Universal Church, especially in those places where decisions on administration, liturgy, doctrine, preaching, and ministry are made?

Wittgenstein once wrote: "A turning wheel that causes no motion elsewhere does not belong to a machine." We have to ask whether, in their relation to the universal Church, Asian Catholics are comparable to a wheel that actually sets nothing in motion while turning. It would be tragic if, despite their number, the Catholics in Asia have no or little

consequence to the way the Universal Church is run. Worse, if the ecclesial machine runs just the same even if the Asian Church did not turn with it.

Therefore, if the renewal of the Church is ongoing, one of the reforms to be institutionalized must have something to do with giving the Asian Church greater scope for meaningful participation especially in the renewal of liturgy, administration, ministry, etc.

In concrete, the following are some of the areas that truly beg for reform, from the point of view of the Asian Catholics: (1) The language of Church Documents; (2) Liturgy; (3) Administrative Structure; (4) Church Discipline; (5) Preaching.

I will just discuss the first.

Reform in the Language of Church Documents

Do you ever wonder how many Asians read Church documents? The Church issues hundreds of documents every year. There are documents from the local hierarchy, the episcopal conferences, international federation of episcopal conferences, local and international synods, plenary councils, provincial councils, *pastoral* statements on certain issues, decrees, exhortations, and others. Most of these documents are intended not only for theologians but for every Catholic.

Why do few people read Church documents? It is certainly not because their content is not appealing. I think it is because there has developed an enormous gap between the framework of understanding of those who compose them and the framework of understanding of those who read them.

The advance of communication is one of the main preoccupation of our modern world. Communication, however, is not just the transmission of knowledge. It is the transmission of meaning, a task which requires interpretation and understanding. It is unfortunate that the demands for effective communication are not taken seriously by those who compose Church documents.

Understanding is tied up with language. Modern hermeneutical theories tell us that understanding is basically linguistic. We do not understand first, and then we speak. Our mode of understanding is already dependent on the linguistic framework we have inherited from

our culture. As it is obvious, the language of Church documents is inherently tied up with the western philosophico-theological framework of understanding.

In the recent of Synod of Asia, when the *Instrumentum Laboris* was being discussed, a delegate from Asia commented that the document was destined to become what one Synod Father described as *one of the best kept secrets of the Church*. For, while recognizing the fact that Asia is a bubbling pot of cultures and languages, the document seemed to presume that those who shall read the document speak the same language. The comment actually echoes what Karl Rahner once wrote: "The attempt to produce an absolutely homogenous theology from the point of view of terminology and questions it deals with, accessible to all theologians, if it could succeed at all, *would end up as the theology of a small sect, unable to address itself to its environment.*"

What Karl Rahner deplores is not the possibility of common understanding, but the illusion of common language which falsely presumes an already achieved common meaning. In Asia, with its multitude of languages, such a presumption can have damaging consequences, not only for inter-religious dialogue but even the dialogue among Catholics in Asia, and the dialogue between the Asian Church and those in other parts of the world.

Another criticism raised against Church documents is their over-stress on the Church itself, its self-understanding, its rights, its role, and its authority. Much of what it says pertains to the definition of its own rights, and the defense of ecclesiastical structures and practices. For example, almost all Roman promulgations, announcements, and decrees of the last few years, except those that appeal for peace and utterances on social and moral questions, come under this heading. These documents that are too ecclesiocentric make the Church appear to ordinary Catholics as a powerful, self-mirroring, and self-sufficient institution that is no longer capable of being questioned or criticized.

In the recent Provincial Council of Manila held in 1996, there was a general feeling of unease concerning the *Draft Document* that was to be discussed in the Council. The Council focused on Lay Ministry in the Church. One lay leader commented that the paradigm of the *Draft Document* on lay ministry was *law and authority*, while lay people would prefer a paradigm of *gift and service*. Another comment went: "It seems that the document is preoccupied with the issue of territori-

ality, while our main concern is partnership. The paper views ministry from the cold and hard limits of the law. We view it from our living journey of communion and mission... The paper appears to us then as a clinical manuscript, a lexicon rather than a testament inspiring vision and commitment."

Further, the perspective assumed by those who composed the document was criticized. "The paper is clearly from the vantage point of the hierarchy – the view from the top which may not be comprehensible to those at the base of the hierarchical pyramid. Perhaps the paper can somehow metamorphose from a "them" to a "we" document, from an intellectual thesis to an inspirational guidelight..."

These comments pointed to one thing: the framework of understanding of those who composed the document did not correspond to the framework of understanding of those for whom the document was intended. During the second day of the Provincial Council of Manila, there was a consensus to set aside the *Draft Document* and compose a new one based on the ongoing dialogue among the delegates.

The Parenetic Structure of Church Documents

An analysis of most documents of the Church reveals that these have a parenetic structure. A parenetic discourse aims to move people to action by the use of three elements. First, an ideal postulate is often presented as the norm. This norm, whether doctrinal or moral, even if it excludes reference to the ordinary world of practical attainment, serves as the foundation for the envisioned personal or collective action. To heighten this ideal, its presentation is coupled with a suspicion, that the reason why people or the world is such as now is because the norm is not being observed, or the ideal does not inspire people, not due to the some fault of the ideal, but due to stubbornness or other human weakness. Hence the need for reminders or exhortations.

Let us take one passage of the Vatican II document on Mass Media, *Inter Mirifica* to illustrate this parenetic structure:

"If the media are to be correctly employed, it is essential that all who use them know the principles of the moral order and apply them faithfully in this domain. They should take into account, first of all, the subject matter or content which each medium communicates in its own way. They should also take account of the circumstances in which the content is communicated – that is to

say, the purpose, the people, the place, the time, etc. The circumstances can modify and even totally alter the morality of a production. In this regard, particular importance may attach to the manner in which any given medium achieves its effect. Its impact may be such that people, especially if they are insufficiently prepared, will only with difficulty advert to it, control it, or if need be, reject it."

We see here a typical parenetical discourse composed of the three elements mentioned above. The first sentence is an ideal postulate. The second and third sentences are exhortations ("They should..."). And the succeeding sentences are couched with suspicion.

Why is it that such a form of rhetorics seldom move people now? It may be because of three reasons. First, the norm, the ideal is presented in a way that its meaning, though preserving its cognitive content, no longer contains its effective and communicative dimensions; It still means something, but no longer equal to man's concern. Second, the suspicion is too preponderant to create a positive framework for development. It paralyzes rather than motivates. And third, the exhortation is just founded on the expected good will of the listeners, on the hope that they will mend their ways after they realized the great difference between what they are now, and what they will be.

Asia is a pluralistic world. Some say that there is a crisis of faith looming ahead, but actually it is a crisis not of faith, but of the pluralistic mode of understanding of the one faith. Just as understanding evolves, so must its medium. If an official Church document is to be an effective vehicle of instruction, inspiration, and guidance, a change in its language is imperative. To paraphrase Karl Rahner: "The attempt to produce a church document absolutely homogeneous from the point of terminology and the questions it deals with, accessible to theologians but not to all the faithful, if it could succeed at all, would end up with a church document understandable to a small sect, unable to address itself to its environment any more." □