

Good Pope John and Vatican II

By Bishop Victor Galeone

Since becoming bishop in 2001, I have often been asked to introduce changes in our diocese to be more in keeping with the “spirit” of Vatican II - just as Pope John XXIII had intended. As we approach the 50th anniversary of Pope John’s election, I would like to examine just what he intended by convoking the council.

Let me preface my reflection with a few anecdotes from the life of this humble pope:

- As a seminarian studying in Rome, I was in St. Peter’s Square the night of October 28, 1958, when Angelo Roncalli gave his first blessing as the newly elected pope. The media soon speculated that at 77, he was elected to be a “caretaker” pope. Besides - being of peasant stock, the third of 13 children from a family of sharecroppers - he lacked the intellectual ability to accomplish anything of substance.
- We soon learned that while serving as papal delegate in Istanbul during the Nazi regime, he had saved the lives of thousands of Jews by issuing them “baptismal” certificates that helped them escape to Switzerland.
- Just two months after his election, he captured the hearts of the Italians by two visits that he made: the first was on Christmas day to the little polio victims in Bambino Gesù Hospital; and the second occurred the next day on his visit to the inmates of Regina Coeli Prison. “You could not come to me,” he explained, “so I came to you.”
- Less than three months into his pontificate, while visiting the Basilica of St. Paul’s, Pope John surprised the world by announcing the Second Vatican Council - which formally began in October 1962.
- Pope John visited the North American College on October 11, 1959 - the seminary where I spent six years - to commemorate the first centenary of its founding. At 5:00 p.m. he arrived in the college chapel for Solemn Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. As assistant master of ceremonies for the occasion, I was kneeling by the side altar steps - the ideal place to observe John XXIII who was kneeling on a prie-dieu in the center. During the singing of the benediction hymns, I found it difficult to concentrate on the words - so mesmerizing was the look on the Holy Father’s face. His eyes were transfixed on the consecrated host in the monstrance, indicating that he was looking at Someone, and not something. To this day, I can still recall that loving, captivating look.

Now then, what did Pope John intend by convoking the Second Vatican Council? He himself gives the answer in the sermon he preached at its opening session in October 1959. He pointed out that the Council was to be “predominately pastoral in character.” Its purpose was not to define any new doctrines, but rather to challenge all Catholics to a “renewed...adherence to all the teachings of the Church...as it still shines forth in the acts of the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council...The substance of the ancient doctrine is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.”

After reminding us “that the truth of the Lord will remain forever,” he added that the opinions of men, often imbued with errors, “vanish as quickly as they arise...The Church has always opposed these errors. Frequently she has condemned them with the greatest severity. Nowadays however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity.”

So what is one to make of the “spirit” of Vatican II, which has given rise to so much confusion in the church? Is that what John XXIII intended? I feel the answer to that question may be found in an entry that he made in his diary while still in the minor seminary. In his journal, he stated that his favorite passage of the Imitation of Christ was chapter 23 from the third book, entitled, “Four things that bring great peace:

1. Strive to do the will of others rather than your own.
 2. Prefer to have less rather than more.
 3. Seek the lowest place and to be beneath all others.
 4. Desire that God's will may always be carried out in your life.
- Behold such a one reaches the fullness of rest and peace.”

To the objection that these are pietistic sentiments of an immature seminarian, I would point out that on becoming bishop in 1925, he chose as his episcopal motto, *Obedientia et Pax* (“Obedience and Peace”) - a synthesis of that journal entry - which became his guiding light.

In my opinion, the real fruit of Vatican II has yet to be realized. The new Pentecost that we prayed for so ardently during the years preceding the council, and the New Evangelization that Pope John Paul II predicted for this century have yet to be seen. They will indeed be realized when we Catholics, of whatever theological persuasion, focus our eyes on the Lord Jesus, and follow not some nebulous “spirit” of Vatican II, but what the council documents actually contain.