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Pope John XXIII's opening address to the Second Vatican Council

Richard McBrien | Nov. 5, 2012 Essays in Theology

By now, many individuals and institutions have observed the 50th anniversary of the start of the Second Vatican Council on Oct. 11, 1962. On that day, Pope John XXIII gave his opening address that laid down the framework for what turned out to be the four sessions of the assembly.

But there is only a short reference to Pope John's opening address in Charles Curran's contribution to the excellent collection of tributes to Vatican II in the *National Catholic Reporter* (10/11/12). I want to make up for this important lapse.

Pope John expressed the hope, in laying down the purpose of the council, that Vatican II would bless the church with greater spiritual riches and new energies so the church might "look to the future without fear."

Then he launched into his oft-quoted criticism of unnamed curial officials who are burdened, he said, with a negative, pessimistic view of the world and of the future of the church.

"In the daily exercise of our pastoral office, we sometimes have to listen, much to our regret, to voices of persons who, though burning with zeal, are not endowed with too much of discretion or measure."

The pope referred to these curial critics as "prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world was at hand."

Over against their pessimism, the pope insisted: "In the present order of things, Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which ... are directed toward the fulfillment of God's superior and inscrutable designs. And everything, even human differences, leads to the greater good of the Church."

Pope John acknowledged that the "greatest concern" of the council must be that "the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more efficaciously," but the "salient point" of Vatican II is not a discussion of one or another article of faith or doctrine of the church.

"For this," the pope insisted, "a council was not necessary. ... The substance of the ancient doctrine of the Deposit of Faith is one thing, and the way it is presented is another." It is the latter; he argued, that needs to be taken into great consideration by a magisterium that must always be "predominantly pastoral in character."

Errors come and go, "like the fog before the sun." The church has always opposed errors regarding the faith and, in the past, did so "with the greatest severity. Nowadays, however, the spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations."

At this council, the pope continued, the Catholic church "desires to show herself to be a loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of mercy and goodness toward children separated from her," and "she spreads everywhere the fullness of Christian charity, than which nothing is more effective in eradicating the seeds of discord,

nothing more efficacious in promoting concord, just peace and the brotherly unity of all."

He concluded: "This council now beginning rises in the Church like daybreak, a forerunner of most splendid light. It is now only dawn."

It was only in the light of subsequent developments during the council itself and immediately afterward that the significance of John XXIII's opening address became clear. It is practically impossible to understand the work of Vatican II except through the prism of this speech.

The pope and his council had broken with habits of the post-Tridentine, Counter-Reformation Catholic church -- approaches that had been in force since the middle of the 16th century.

The spirit of the Vatican II church was to be characterized by a theological hope, rooted in the activity of the Holy Spirit and Divine Providence that would banish fear and pessimism.

The church was no longer to oppose error and dissent through condemnations and punitive actions, but through a spirit of patience and mercy. Following Karl Rahner, whether directly or not, the most effective way to deal with error is through a positive and compelling presentation of the truth.

The church must always be mindful of the crucially important distinction between the substance of faith and the way in which it is presented.

Vatican II was to be "the beginning of a new day," the pope pointed out, "not its climax."

Fifty years is not a long time in the history of the church. "It is now only dawn," Pope John XXIII reminded us.

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