

Why Yves Congar is relevant today

Robert McClory | Jun. 6, 2013 NCR Today

Dominican theologian Yves Congar has often been credited for his powerful influence at the Second Vatican Council. He was a member of the council's preparatory commission at the explicit request of Pope John XXIII. And during the council itself, he was a member of several key committees, helping compose and edit eight major documents. But only recently did I realize Congar may have been a singular reason the council came to be in the first place.

Among the volumes in the library of Pope John, there was discovered a copy of Congar's book, [*True and False Reform in the Church*](#) [1], heavily annotated in the pope's own handwriting. According to Dominican Fr. Paul Philibert, a Vatican II expert, that book, "which may claim to be Pope John's inspiration for convoking the council," deserves study today, since many of the problems Congar diagnosed in 1950 still plague the church. Congar concluded his study by declaring that the surest way to bring about real reform in the church was through an ecumenical council.

That Congar was so visible and influential during the council came as a surprise to most Vatican observers. For some 13 years, he had been under heavy church discipline because of his involvement in ecumenical activity with Protestant churches. And when he published *True and False Reform* in 1950, the Vatican banned any further printing of the book and any translations of it into foreign languages. He was told all his future writings must be submitted to the Vatican for approval before publication. After the council, his restoration as a respected scholar and theologian continued. In 1994, he was named a cardinal deacon by Pope John Paul II shortly before his death.

I believe a second or third look at Congar's book might provide church leaders, especially Pope Francis, and other interested Catholics with insight into the direction Congar (and Pope John) were hoping to move the church.

Here are a few samples from *True and False Reform*:

There is a risk "that the ecclesiastical apparatus [of the church] might overshadow the action of the Spirit and of grace in people's lives." This, he says is the "temptation of Pharisaism," a deep attachment to habitual forms of religious expression than to the spirit of life they aim to express. "Inside the system of the Pharisees there was a quest for legal purity, going from one subtlety to another and ending in the narrow legalism that our Lord fought against."

"The church needs reform, and this is not the task of one single person, the sovereign pontiff or a certain number of cardinals ... but the task of the entire world." New ideas and movements arise in response to regional and local opportunities, he says. "They need both the freedom to develop and the approval of the authorities."

"If there is sin on the part of the reform movement in refusing or misunderstanding the demand for church unity, there is parallel sin for the institution to misconstrue or stifle prophetic impulses. Besides, since real vital impulses are irrepressible, if they cannot find a sufficient outlet, won't they have to create an alternative

expression elsewhere?" The obligation of the periphery is to seek ecclesiastical status, he says. The obligation of the center is to attend to the periphery "when the sap is bubbling in a tree having growing pains."

"If [church] personnel are chosen only from men of a certain type, generally conservative and safe, reinforcing only the static dimensions in the notions of fidelity and tradition -- that is choosing people who don't cause problems, are not the sources of surprises, and don't take any risks -- then evidently the institution ends up placing a barrier of isolation between the periphery and the center, making the center a kind of 'party'. Such an agency would meet some of the needs of an institution, such as security and moderation, but it would fail to respond to other needs ... of a body always anxious to adapt and to make progress in the world."

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[1] <http://www.amazon.com/True-False-Reform-Church-Congar/dp/0814656935>