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Still relevant? Vatican II Forty Years On

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THE RECENT television series Grumpy Old Men featured some relics of 'the summer of love', those who had been among 'the beautiful people' of the 1960s. As the interviews revealed, neither fame nor fortune had inoculated the former stars against that most implacable of foes: time. By weathering the insouciance of youth, time had carved out a new landscape for their lives, to say nothing of its effects on their faces. Pervading their present attitudes was the eponymous grumpiness, which expressed their resentment of the contemporary world, a world beyond their control and not to their liking. Summer, then, had turned into a harsh autumn, one that presaged a bitter winter.

The grumpy old men raged against present trends in manners, fashion, politics, and technology (is that 'bluetooth' and 'blackberry' or 'blacktooth' and 'blueberry?'). Unifying their anguished, albeit insightful, even endearing, tirades was the conviction that today's 'postmodern', 'globalised', and 'digitised' world is less the love-child of 'the sixties' than a nightmarish rejection of all that they hoped would follow the dawning of the age of Aquarius.

Critics of the '60s, however, might disagree that recent social developments have managed only to sour the bright promise of that mythical decade. Indeed, ironically, today's conservative social commentators, irrespective of age or gender, often indict the alleged excesses of the '60s—individualism, materialism, and lack of discipline—for enabling some of the developments against which the former stars now rage.

The experience of the grumpy old men, no less than their rejection by critics who view the '60s in a negative light, has some fascinating parallels with life within the Roman Catholic Church during the last few decades. Underpinning the comparison is the fact that some Catholics, now

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generally of 'a certain age', would regard the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) as the church's 'summer of love'. In particular, the Council's final document, 'The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World' (Gaudium et spes), evokes the memory of a church that was indeed 'a-changin':

After more than a century of turning away from the world, this document resolutely turned the gaze of the church towards the world. Its tone was optimistic, yet marked by a realism about the nature of sin and the complexity of the world's problems. For many within the church, it mapped out a way of encountering the world pastorally. For those outside the church, it signalled a commitment to the world that had not been in evidence for generations (Schreiter 2005, 18).

Complementing that assessment is the claim by the historian John O'Malley that Gaudium et spes crystallises what he classifies as the 'style' or 'culture' of the Council as a whole. Although O'Malley argues that the culture of Vatican II, characterised by its focus on the positive, its concern for the dignity of the human person, and its advocacy of the need for humanity to work together for the common good, was particularly evident in Gaudium et spes, he sees its presence spread throughout the Council's documents, which:

... abound in metaphor and analogies, and they engage for the most part in a discourse of congratulation. Often the intent is to bring people together around some shared value and to encourage horizontal relationships and a sense of collegiality, another of the council's most characteristic words (O'Malley 2004, 176).

Since those features contrast starkly with the atmosphere prevailing in the Catholic Church during the anti-Modernist crackdown in the early decades of the twentieth century, it is scarcely surprising that some commentators describe the initial period of Vatican II's reception as 'the phase of exuberance' (Kasper 1989, 166). At the heart of that exuberance was the belief that both new forms of ecclesial life and new ways of engaging the world beyond the church had become possible, perhaps even mandatory.

As is well known, however, there is another side of the story. Not only was enthusiasm for the Council never universal



among Catholics, but divisions over the value of the Council have increased in the forty years since its close. In fact, as Walter Kasper summarises them, the divisions have become so broad that they approach polarisation: 'Where one person talks about renewal, another sees only breakdown, crisis and loss of identity' (Kasper 1989, 169). The immediate post-Vatican II euphoria has long since fallen foul of the hermeneutic of suspicion, which has become strong enough to call into question the methodology, effects, and even significance of the Council.

In terms of methodology, a prominent accusation is that the Fathers of the Council, as a result of their naivety, failed to appreciate the implications of their actions. To take one example of that critique: a sociological study claims that the Council, because it was blind to the potential impact of revising the 'cost/benefit ratio' of priesthood, contributed to the dramatic post-Vatican II decline in candidates for ordination. The argument runs thus: by ending the separation between the church and the world and by emphasising a positive role for 'the laity', Vatican II reduced the 'rewards' of priesthood (social esteem and influence in the face of heroic sacrifice), while simultaneously heightening the 'burden' of it (mandatory celibacy became less comprehensible in light of the Council's affirmation of the laity in general and marriage in particular) (Starke & Finke 2000, 177-82).

Among the critics of the effects flowing from the Council, it is worth noting the attitudes displayed by the contemporary generation of American seminarians. A major study of that group identified a tendency to blame Vatican II for a loss of attention to the order and discipline of the church (Schuth 1999, 211). In addition, for some of today's seminarians, Vatican II is simply another event in the history of the church, one that is not necessarily more relevant to the present moment of the church than any previous council (Schuth & Maples 2005, 34). Similarly, the Council is of only marginal importance for those younger people identified as 'contemporary traditionalists'. Common to this demographic is the rejection of forms of worship and catechesis they experienced when growing up after Vatican II. In place of what flowed from the Council, the members of this group prefer to embrace expressions of piety and a sense of the church that reflect emphases prevalent before their birth. In the hierarchy of influences on the lives of these young people, the documents of Vatican II rank

behind the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Whalen 2002, 590).

When combined with recent contentious episcopal appointments, the foreshadowing of more restrictive norms for liturgical practice, and a myriad of other indicators of the dominant spirit of contemporary ecclesial life, the revisionist interpretations of what the Council intended and achieved would suggest that any exuberance in the wake of Vatican II, to say nothing of longing for a new Pentecost, was misguided. Clearly, for those who hoped that four decades of the post-Vatican II church would have produced different fruit, descent into grumpiness beckons.

Its allure notwithstanding, the triumph of grumpiness among those who claim to find inspiration in both the content and style of Vatican II would not serve the Council well. Not only would it confirm the suspicion that Vatican II offered nothing of lasting value, it would also imply that hope and vision in the church cannot survive in a 'wintry season', where conditions are not as one would wish (Rahner 1990, 189-200). Still worse, grumpy resignation could suggest an unwillingness to engage with the God whom none of us possesses on our own terms. Any such reluctance to wrestle with the God who is always both greater and 'other', would not only risk confusing God with our idea of God, it would also be a failure to appropriate a key element on Vatican II: its recovery of a focus on the mystery of God (Dalferth 2000, 22).

As an alternative to grumpy resignation, the remainder of this paper will highlight the potential for creativity in the ongoing reception of Vatican II. In so doing, it will also challenge any tendency to regard Vatican II as irrelevant to the needs of today's church.

Like every valid council of the church, the Second Vatican Council was, as Kasper stresses, 'an event brought about by the divine Spirit who guides the church. Consequently, the results are a guiding principle which is binding on the church' (Kasper 1989, 168). In other words, affirming the significance of Vatican II for today's church is more than a matter of personal taste: as an event of the Spirit, Vatican II makes a claim on all of us.

Consequently, we must continue to engage in the reception

of Vatican II. Reception is neither a one-dimensional process of logical deduction nor the assertion of particular preferences. In fact, reception is an ongoing and open-ended activity that cannot be independent of our continued conversion and growth in discipleship. This is so because, to draw on Ormond Rush's fine analysis, reception requires:

The creative involvement of human beings in the decisions of history and in the creative interpretation of 'what God would want' the church of the future to be ... the human receivers of revelation are to be portrayed as active participants in discerning the way forward, co-deciders with

God's Spirit, assuring continuity through creative discontinuity ... What has been given as the ultimate criterion, the *regula fidei* is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, which must be received over and over in the power of that Spirit who 'will guide you into all truth' [Jn 16:13] (Rush 2004, 76).

In the light of Rush's outline of reception, it is evident that Vatican II was itself an event of reception, particularly through its *ressourcement*. This reception, however, was not a neat and seamless process. In fact, the documents of the Council were the product of debate, disagreement, conciliation, and compromise (Komonchak 2003, 146). Clearly, then, reception is a multi-layered, even messy, process. This suggests that our reception of Vatican II's documents can be authentic only if we remain willing to engage in a similarly multi-layered process. The *sine qua non* of that process is the need to eschew approaching it while blinkered by non-negotiable foundations, such as claiming that the Council was either an exclusively 'liberal' event or an exclusively 'conservative' one. In short, we must pursue what Kasper describes as the 'authentic, integral interpretation and implementation' of the Council (Kasper 1989, 169).

In addition, authentic reception must echo Vatican II's own dynamics of participation. As the Council was an event expressive of the church's communion, so reception must likewise express communion, rather than the dictation of any one group. This too implies the need for debate, disagreement, conciliation, and compromise, as 'the great requirement of this communion is openness, a readiness to

welcome, to give and to exchange' (Komonchak 2003, 146). Clearly, then, there is an intimate connection between reception and the formation of the *sensus fidelium*, part of which must include a continued commitment to dialogue with other churches in the hope of realising the church as the one body of Christ.

The need for ongoing engagement with, for reception of, the Council underscores that ecclesiology is, in the helpful account of Gerard Mannion:

an aspirational undertaking, charged with eschatology and hope: the church sees its mission as being bound-up with trying to build that ideal community of justice and righteousness which Christians refer to as the Kingdom of God. Hence Vatican II's image of a pilgrim church (Mannion 2004, 307).

As it did with reception, so Vatican II went beyond merely underscoring the need for the church to be a pilgrim: it modelled the pilgrimage. Indeed, in regard to both the *ad intra* and the *ad extra* of the church's life, the Council highlighted how the church could realise more fully the implications of its identity as 'sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humanity' (*Lumen gentium*, par. 1). What the Council sought through its marriage of the *ressourcement* and the *aggiornamento* was to draw on the richness of the tradition in order to discern appropriate responses to the 'hiddenness' of the Spirit in the present moment (Thiel 1995, 65).

The primary tool for the Council's reshaping of the inner life of the church was its emphasis on the church as 'the People of God'. By recovering the centrality of baptism and the priesthood of the faithful, Vatican II opened up possibilities for new relationships within the church. These possibilities were unimaginable when, in the centuries following Trent, the all-but-exclusive focus on the church's hierarchical order seemed to promote passive obedience as the primary contribution that the laity could make to the church's well-being. Without contradicting either Trent or Vatican I on the indispensability of hierarchy, the Second Vatican Council was able to identify a broader context for locating hierarchy and order than had been evident in the church's recent past. In so doing, Vatican II contributed to the retrieval of the richness of catholicity, which endeavours to

embrace the 'both...and', not simply the 'either...or'.

We ought to be wary, therefore, of asserting that Vatican II's alleged naïve interference with long-settled patterns within the church was the cause of either the tensions that have emerged in recent decades in the relationship between the bishops and the rest of the baptised or of the debates that have developed apropos of ministry: has ordained priesthood passed its 'use-by' date? is it legitimate to talk of 'lay ministry'? Far from being a manifestation of naivety, the Council's approach expressed the implications of catholicity, itself a reflection of God's mystery, which not only permits, but actually requires diversity, rather than uniformity.

That our period of history has witnessed division, even polarisation, amongst Catholics has less to do with the Council leaving us rudderless, than with the fact that forging catholic unity is never less than challenging. A likely reason for the particular complexity of this challenge in the last forty years is that the ecclesial community, as it approached the reception of Vatican II, lacked a lived memory of how to achieve authentic change or how to reconcile differences without the forceful suppression of those questioning the status quo.

Just as an understanding of life within the Catholic Church in the first half of the twentieth century can thus exonerate Vatican II from accusations of naivety, or worse, so a perspective on the church's relationship with the world in the same period indicates that *Gaudium et spes* was far from an anarchic abandonment of all that secured the church's place in society. Indeed, following Johann Baptist Metz, it is possible to argue that the Catholic response to developments in European history from the time of the Reformation through to the twentieth century had resulted primarily in the identification of the church as a 'counter' movement that was not part of 'the modern history of freedom' (Metz 1998, 46). Seen in that light, Vatican II's insistence on the need for dialogue, to say nothing of its openness for the church to learn from the world, was not a loss, but a means to highlight that the identity of the church as the sacrament of God's kingdom did not require dependence on the portrayal of the church as 'a perfect society'.

Nonetheless, it might well seem that the prospects for the church to engage in fruitful dialogue with the world are less healthy today than might have been the case forty years ago. This is particularly so since, as Charles Taylor frames it, a feature of the contemporary landscape is that 'whatever is foreign to Christianity seems to involve the rejection of it' (Taylor 1999, 16). Given that Vatican II knew little or nothing of the postmodern, of globalisation, of terrorism, or of sundry other features that are less about the summer of love than the nightmares of the grumpy old men, surely its vision, its 'style' has long since passed its use-by date?

Here, the specifically Catholic argument about Vatican II acts as a microcosm of the debate about the purpose of the church and its relationship to the world that has developed within the whole Christian Church in the context of 'the culture wars'. In that wider debate, there is a stark division between those who believe that the church is '...a bulwark against confusion, chaos, and lack of standards to be found in the wider society', and those who argue that '...what holds Christians together in community is the concern to figure out together what their commitment to

Christ and the practices of the church mean for the whole of life together, where quite a bit of that is not very obvious and certainly not from the start' (Tanner 2001, 41). Clearly, Vatican II's approach to both the ad intra and ad extra of the church, its focus on communion, pilgrimage, and dialogue suggests that 'the church as bulwark' was not in its lexicon. Still, there remains the question whether Vatican II's dialogical approach can meet today's challenges or whether it ought to yield the field, as regards both the inner and outer life of the church, to more robust and confrontational methods.

Despite the current popularity of approaches that favour less openness both in the church and towards the world, there is little to suggest that 'redrawing lines of orthodoxy' or opting for forms of 'neo-exclusivism', which replace dialogue with separation, even hostility, will be productive (Mannion 2004, 314). In addition, the implications of catholicity suggest the need for diversity and dialogue in the church as well as between the church and the world, as does the very notion of God that guides theology:

Theology will probe those aspects of religious practice which

pull in the direction of ideological distortion, those things which presuppose that there is a mode of religious utterance wholly beyond the risks of conversation, a power beyond resistance, a perspective that leaves nothing out. It will challenge the fantasy that such things are available to human beings; but it will also challenge the notion that these are the terms in which God is to be imagined (Williams 1995, 323).

A church that is an authentic pilgrim will recognise that it receives and responds to God, but does not, cannot control God. Such a church will be a living community of conversion and discernment, rather than one that individualism subverts or authority dominates. Such a church will also be willing, as part of its journey to the fullness of life in Christ, to move in new directions, which express its discernment of the summons of the Spirit, who promotes that most paradoxical of achievements: the integration of both faithful reception and authentic development of the same tradition. As this paper has stressed, the Second Vatican Council not only endorsed such a pilgrimage, it incarnated it. Today's church, guided by both the letter and style of Vatican II, must do no less.

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