

The Principle of Pastoralty at Vatican II: Challenges of a Prospective Interpretation of the Council

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Today, a "prospective" interpretation of the conciliar event and of the work of Vatican II is demanded because of the cultural changes, sometimes called "second revolution" that separate us from the Council's time and force us to change our relationship with the Council. The main task is not to read the documents, which are marked by the context of those years, in order to draw from them a fairly complete *teaching* that, then, we would need to apply. Today's main challenge is to enter more deeply into the "ways of proceeding" or "the way of proceeding" that the Council was able to invent and that may be designated by the term "pastorality." The emphasis on the "how," or on the *modus operandi*, allows us to avoid any confusion between different cultural situations. At the same time, it allows us to address our own confusions in light of the Council's achievements. This is possible because we become aware that our own confusions are situated within a long time frame, which, by letting aside the modernist's crisis, dates back to the way in which Catholicism was shaped during the modern era.

I will briefly return to this historic change after explaining the term "pastorality" and after having showed how, through a genetic vision of the Church in history and society, at least sketched in the last conciliar texts, a kind of "generative grammar" for addressing the challenges that are ours was in the making.

1. The explanation of "pastoral style" by the Council

If we want to understand the principle of "pastorality" of Vatican II, we should not limit ourselves to the few statements of the famous opening speech of John XXIII that invited the Council's fathers to "*measure everything according to the forms and proportions* of a Magisterium with a mainly pastoral character." It is also necessary to analyze—historically—the process of *conciliar* reception of this principle and show how it becomes the magnet that attracts various texts and textual groups of the Council to form a real *corpus*, "open," as we shall see. Three aspects gradually imposed themselves on the self-understanding of Vatican II:

(1) During the first period (1962-1963), the Council's assembly understands that it is necessary to abandon the juxtaposition between "doctrinal" and "pastoral" and to aim at presenting the Catholic truth in a style that makes *possible* its "reception" by our contemporaries.

(2) In the second and third period (1963-1964), the Council realizes even more forcefully that introspection. It also understands which type of "reform" the Church must accept to propose and to present the Gospel in a credible and an acceptable

manner. We find this perspective of a permanent self-reform in the Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*) and the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio* 6).

(3) It was not until 1965 that appears a third aspect of the principle of pastorality: a new attention to the historical and cultural roots of the *recipients* of the Gospel and the discovery that the Revelation is entirely historical and therefore subject to continual reinterpretation *according to the situation* of those to whom it is transmitted. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* (No. 44) talks about a "proper way to proclaim the revealed word (*accommodata praedicatio*) which must remain the law of all evangelization (*lex omnis evangelizationis*)," and the number 22 of the Decree on the Missionary Activity *Ad gentes* makes explicit this "law."

The intrinsic and reversible relationship between the Gospel and the context, which appears here, is the real reason why the process of "*measuring everything according to the forms and proportions* of a Magisterium mainly pastoral" is not completed at the end of the Council and should, instead, be claimed once again and continued locally and globally, every time a new historical context requires it. The Council's *corpus* is like "suspended" because of the *effective* process of contextual interpretation of the Gospel.

Moreover, the Council codifies the fundamental structure, the "lex" of this process of contextual interpretation of the Gospel. Hence, we can affirm that this process is "open" (remaining at the same time in relation to the matrix that is the biblical *corpus*). The inevitable and felicitous contextual pluralization of the figures of Christianity, which depends on this historical and cultural "openness" of the *corpus*, could be obscured by a legitimate concern for Catholic unity. However, the *global vision* that the Council effectively proposes to those who will receive the Council has a "genetic side" that is discretely present in its last documents. This "genetic side" provides the foundation for a "generative grammar." Today, this "generative grammar" allows the believers to articulate their being Christian and ecclesial in *multiple* ways.

2. A "genetic vision" of the Christian and ecclesial existence

In recent years, the theological research has highlighted the phenomenon of intertextuality and the idea of "textual *corpus*" which, despite its internal complexity and multiple forms of compromise, offers a *coherent vision*. The idea of "textual *corpus*" articulates the threefold ultimate referent, that is, the Gospel of God or Revelation, modern society, and the Church—where the latter is doubly *de-centered* by our listening to God's Word *and* by the presence of the other. The idea of "genesis," of a "genetic vision," is dispersed in the Council's documents. Moreover, this idea is not limited to just *one* aspect of the coherent vision of the Council's *corpus*, but it concerns, at the same time, the Gospel of God or Revelation, modern society, and the Church—*specifically in their mutual articulation*. Finally, our perception of this "genetic vision" depends on a dual interpretative decision:

(1) To relativize the classical distinction between already Christianized countries and mission countries. This relativization leads, first, to *go beyond the juxtaposition* of conciliar texts on the Church by placing, on one side, *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*, and, on another side, *Ad gentes*. Second, this relativization also leads to reinterpret the overall vision of *Lumen gentium* in light of the Decree on Mission *Ad gentes*.

Our second interpretative decision requires:

(2) To identify the biblical background of these texts and give to it—"in the footsteps" of *Dei verbum*—the status of matrix of *our* way of considering the *birth* of faith and of *today's* Church.

This two-track operation is based in particular on the scriptural indications, particularly from Luke's Gospel, and on the pneumatological indications (*Ad gentes*, 4). In particular, *Ad gentes* 4, that focuses on the mission of the Holy Spirit, is a real rewriting of *Lumen gentium* 4. We mention only the last sentence that refers to 17 passages of the Acts of Apostles, which are spread throughout the whole document, and that appears to be an invitation to read again the whole book of the Acts of Apostles: "Sometimes [the Holy Spirit] even visibly anticipates the Apostolic action, just as the Holy Spirit unceasingly accompanies and directs it in different ways." (*Ad gentes* 4)

We do not have the time to fully develop this two-track operation—biblical and ecclesiological. We can remember, however, what the chapter 2 of *Ad gentes* says about the three stages of an *ecclesiological genesis* within society. The starting point is provided by the "testimony" of Christians in their non-Christian environment.

The purpose of this "presence" is, first, "that others consider their good works and glorify the Father (Mt 5:16)." This is a decisive addition of the decree *Ad gentes* that reaffirms in a new way the "sacramentality" of the Church which has been expressed in *Lumen gentium* 1.

The second purpose of this "presence" is that the non-Christians "can perceive more fully the real meaning of human life and the universal bond of the community of mankind" (*Ad gentes* 11.1). Moreover, the second article of the decree *Ad gentes* focuses on the preaching of the Gospel, with an analysis of the process of conversion and of its spiritual and sacramental structure, where the process of conversion is aimed at gathering the people of God (*Ad gentes* 13-14). We mention once again only the first sentence that, as the following part of *Ad gentes*, is filled with scriptural references, particularly from the Acts of the Apostles: "Wherever God opens a door of speech for proclaiming the mystery of Christ, there is announced to all men with confidence and constancy, the living God ..." (*Ad gentes* 13.1)

It is only in the third article of the decree *Ad gentes* that the "formation" of the Christian community is traced—we could say, from the bottom up. The ministries that are needed for the genesis of the Christian community are first of all mentioned to their fullest extent: "in order to plant the Church and to make the Christian community grow, various ministries are needed, which are raised up by divine calling from the midst of the faithful congregation, and are to be carefully fostered

and tended to by all." (*Ad gentes* 15). It is only afterwards that *Ad gentes* addresses the priestly ministry and other specific vocations (*Ad gentes* 16-18).

Of course, these different steps have an *ideal and typical* character that must be understood from the scriptural "thread" of the text, especially from the ecclesiological-genetic vision of the Acts of the Apostles that begins to surface in *Ad gentes* 4. If we want to encourage the missionary *creativity* that is integral to this "foundational" perspective (*Lumen gentium* 5), we must help the faithful to insert themselves *actively* (*participatio actuosa*) in the life of the Church and, accordingly, we should transmit to them a "way of proceeding," by placing the future of Christian life and of the ecclesial community in the hands of the *whole* people of God.

Definitely, this is the main aim of the Council. At this crucial juncture the idea of a "generative grammar" of our faith is presented. This idea underlies both the event of the Council and the *corpus* of Vatican II. Today, because of the current contextual changes, mentioned at the beginning of my presentation, we should make explicit this idea of a "generative grammar."

3. A "way of proceeding:" the core of a "generative grammar" of the faith

This "way of proceeding" was prepared well before the Council by the multiple movements of renewal and by their pastoral and spiritual pedagogies, which are evoked in the decree on ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio* (No. 6). This "way of proceeding" has two inseparable sides: first, it is a way to hear God speak to us; second, it is a way to get along among humans.

(1) As to the first side, there is a textual line that needs to be identified. This line goes from chapter 6 of *Dei verbum*—on the Holy Scripture in the life of the Church—, to the numbers 9 and 10 of *Sacrosanctum concilium*—on the liturgy as the summit and the source at the heart of all other ecclesial activities—, going through the numbers 4 and 11 of *Gaudium et spes*—on discerning the signs of the times.

In these passages, the Council describes three different "practices" whose *articulation* is the first challenge of the "grammar" that should be conveyed to the faithful. These three "practices" are: first, the reading of the Scriptures; second, the discernment of the signs of the times; third, the access to one's interiority and to the "colloquium" with God in solitude and in the liturgy. Both the interpretation of the Bible and the interpretation of the present moment cannot be separated, just as it is impossible to hear God's voice *today* without discovering God's voice already at work in those we encounter daily and in their culture. But to discuss further the interpretation of the Bible and the interpretation of the present moment, we affirm that they are both based on our listening ability and learning capability; moreover, they both aim at an ongoing conversion. Finally, we should consent to receive the spiritual initiation that is outlined in *Sacrosanctum concilium* 9 and that is not theologically far from the chapter 2 of the decree *Ad gentes*. This spiritual initiation recalls that the first steps are listening to the Gospel, before the journey continues

(in the number 10 of *Sacrosanctum concilium*) by experiencing the liturgy as the "source and summit" of the journey, and then returning to one's everyday life.

(2) As to the other side of this "way of proceeding," that can be called communicative, it is closely related to the first side that I just described, while at the same time it is the context where we verify it, because it is impossible to hear God speak without wanting to understand each other. Again, the "collegial" practice of the Conciliar Fathers precedes the texts that testify their collegial practice, especially when we consider some indications of the decree *Unitatis redintegratio* 11, and the declaration *Dignitatis humanae* 3, on "the common search for the truth."

Two aspects are highlighted: first, the importance of *reasoning and arguing*, in the Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis humanae*); second, the criterion of *concordance* between *what* is sought by the research partners—the truth of the Gospel—and *how to search it* "with love of the truth, charity and humility," as the Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio* affirms. The criterion of *concordance* is crucial because it leads all members and partners of a specific group or community, independently of any authoritarian strategy, to the *original experience* of a victory over violence and to the spiritual understanding of their own *becoming*.

Finally, the "generative grammar" of the Council is rooted in the *modus agendi* of Christ himself (*Dignitatis humanae* 11), its *modus conversationis* (*Dei verbum* 7)—that is, how Jesus relates to, and lives with others—or even Jesus' way of being poor and humble (*Lumen gentium* 8). We mention at least the beginning of the *Vita Christi*, as found in the Declaration on Religious Freedom, which highlights the paradoxical nature of Christ's "way":

God calls men to serve Him in spirit and in truth, hence they are bound in conscience but they stand under no compulsion. ... This truth appears at its height in Christ Jesus, in whom God manifested Himself and His ways with men. Christ is at once our Master and our Lord and also meek and humble of heart. In attracting and inviting His disciples He used patience. He wrought miracles to illuminate His teaching and to establish its truth, but His intention was to rouse faith in His hearers and to confirm them in faith, not to exert coercion upon them. ... the apostles followed the same way. ... This is the way along which the martyrs and other faithful have walked through all ages and over all the earth. (*Dignitatis humanae* 11)

Hence, the Christological side is inseparable from the pneumatological side; for whatever the language, *any* "grammar" is waiting for a word actually uttered by one person or another, here and now, where the listening and the understanding always reveal an *unpredictable* surprise. And this is especially true when, at the same time, in listening and in winning over violence, the voice of God is heard—without confusion, without separation.

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In conclusion, the novelty of this approach to the common faith in its "expressive" (*Gaudium et spes* 44) plurality is confirmed by the conciliar conflict that it provoked and that appears to be a "paradigmatic conflict." Here it is enough to mention as a proof of this conflict the corrections made by the Curia to the opening speech of John XXIII.

The pope had actually written his opening speech in Italian. He mentioned this version several times before his death and it is included in the *Decree on Ecumenism* 6 (*Unitatis redintegratio*, cited above). On the day of the opening of the Council, however, he read the official Latin version, crafted by his translator. The Italian version takes distance from Vatican I when it distinguishes the "substance of the deposit of faith," taken as *a whole* and without making reference to an internal plurality that is already part of such an expression. However, without considering the historical "form" that such an expression already had at that time, the Latin translation replaces the more *historical* distinction with the more *dogmatic* distinction between "the deposit, that is, *the truths contained in our venerable doctrine*" and "the form in which *these truths* are enounced" (while these truths keep the same meaning and the same scope; this is an explicit reference to the canon of Vincent of Lérins that appears in the Vatican I).

Hence, the hermeneutic conception of the faith that is involved in the distinctions of John XXIII disappears. Moreover, the self-reform of the Church is reduced to secondary elements and it concerns only the pastoral application of a teaching that is acquired once and for all. These changes are not without consequences. They indicate a fundamentalist and uncompromising relationship that such a type of Magisterium would maintain with the Tradition and Scripture, on the one hand, and with the recipients of the Gospel on the other hand.

We find here a conflict that runs through all the modern era, including the modernist crisis. The insistence on the "*modus*" or "style" of the expression of the faith implies a rationality that is historical and "procedural" or "communicative," as we find in Kant and in other modern thinkers. This rationality emerges forcefully in the conciliar assembly when it faces an uncertain future, if this future is simply considered collectively according to some basic rules. In this presentation, we explained this rationality in terms of "generative grammar." This concept aims at thinking, *at the same time*, the collective "formation" of the conciliar *corpus* and what today allows us to "shape" the Christian and ecclesial existence in our contemporary context, while allowing an ecclesial agreement due to a similar way of proceeding that is based on the same Christological and pneumatological reference.

Translated from the French by: Andrea Vicini, SJ