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Maria Milazzo

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mmilazzo001@csbsju.edu

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The Church in the Modern Context

by Maria Milazzo

ABSTRACT:

This paper on the Church in the Modern Context brings into conversation the goals of Vatican I, Vatican II, and those of Pope Francis in today's modern context. It seeks to understand the context of the councils and where Pope Francis seeks to lead the Church today, especially one that resembles a field hospital.

SYNOD:

Pope Francis wants to understand the challenges of the modern context through the Synod. One of my favorite parts of the Synod is that Pope Francis is wanting to listen to all the people of the Church and not only the Bishops and Cardinals. This listening leads our Church to understanding the modern context and the challenges that people face so that the Church may meet people where they're at, ministering as a field hospital.



In *Vatican I and Vatican II: Councils in the Living Tradition*, Kristin Colberg outlines and deepens one's understanding of the intentions behind both Vatican councils. Vatican I tends to be misunderstood due to its seemingly restrictive and domineering mentalities. What one fails to recognize is the context in which Vatican I was called and what the original intentions of the council were. It is misunderstood that the theology of papal infallibility was the main focus of this council. Rather, the focus lied on preparing a strategic plan "concerning ecclesial authority in the face of serious internal and external threats."¹ Colberg describes this context in the setting of multiple traumas surrounding Rome. The first trauma is brought on by the conciliarist view and the Gallican movement. These questioned not only the Pope's authority, but also made it difficult for the church to act on matters that endangered it. The second trauma was brought on by the political divide in Europe caused by the French Revolution. This meant that there was "an emerging philosophical and practical separation between the church and the state."² This began diminishing not only the authority the church had on political and national affairs, but also its source of income. The third trauma dealt with the rise of rationalism and liberalism. This challenged the church's teaching authority which had flourished in the past. Therefore, the church was being challenged and threatened by the world in many different ways. This caused great conflict in which Pope Pius IX felt the need to call together bishops in finding ways to resolve this conflict as a church, thus the Vatican Council was called in December 1869. In summary of why Vatican I was called, Colberg says, "the principle purpose of Vatican I was to preserve the independence of the church by securing its voice in a world that seemed, in many ways, increasingly opposed to its very existence."³ Without knowing this history of trauma, one would not be able to fully understand the meaning behind Vatican I. Where as Vatican II, which we will look at in a moment, sought to embrace the emerging worldview and pastorally meet people where they're at, Vatican I chose to define the church "against the worldview that was emerging."⁴

1 Colberg, 22.

2 Ibid., 25.

3 Ibid., 40.

4 Ibid., 30.

Pope John XXIII knew that the issues surrounding Vatican I had not been fully resolved and there were yet again more traumas surrounding the world after both world wars and the traumatic events of the Holocaust. The church had work to do and John XXIII's aim was two-fold in the convening of another Vatican council, "the first was to promote the 'enlightenment, edification and joy of the entire Christian people,' and the second was to extend 'a renewed cordial invitation to the faithful of the separated communities to participate with us in this quest for unity and grace, of which so many souls long in all parts of the world.'"⁵ These two points were heard in his opening address at the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudet mater ecclesia*). John XXIII sought to return to early church practices of looking to the past and listening to its voices, taking into account all voices from the East and the West, from the Middle Ages all the way to modern times.⁶ What this tells me is that he didn't think all voices had been heard up until this point. What Vatican II seemed to do differently from Vatican I is encourage the church and all its members and ministers to walk with each other during the times we are currently living in. John XXIII wanted the church to bring herself "up-to-date where required, and by the wise organization of mutual cooperation, the Church will make men, families and peoples really turn their minds to heavenly things."⁷ He brought the term "ecumenical council" to the heart and lips of many for the first time. It was (and at some times still is) radical to think of the church in conversation with our Christian brothers and sisters. From this opening address, John XXIII describes the church's view at this point as one that guards the commandment and mission given to us by Jesus but also teaches it and evangelizes throughout all the world. He recognizes that the church should never depart from the "sacred patrimony of truth received from the Fathers.... but at the same time she must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate."⁸ The church recognizes its mission to bring all God's people closer to the Mystery of the Divine, but this cannot be done by denying people's current modern situations.

5 Ibid., 85-6.

6 *Gaudet mater ecclesia*

7 *Gaudet mater ecclesia*

8 *Gaudet mater ecclesia*

Pope Francis agrees with this concept entirely and goes further to describe the church as a field hospital. To avoid the church keeping Christ to herself, “the church must go out of itself to the peripheries, to minister to the needy.”⁹ He describes mercy as the medicine in this field hospital and the way that the church ministers to God’s people. “Bringing the medicine of mercy to the world is the most effective way for the disciples of Jesus to recapture the joy of the Gospel.”¹⁰ As minister of the church, we are to “take up the work of healing by sharing in the sufferings of others.”¹¹ Most importantly, Pope Francis sees the church as a “community that taps into and shares our talents to find creative ways to help those most in need.”¹² If this does not stem from the pastoral movement of Vatican II to meet people where they are at, be Christ’s beacon of light to others, and be witness to the church out in the world, then I don’t know what does! This is not to say that Vatican I did not do these things; however, as we have seen from these readings, Vatican I tended to estrange itself from the world and its modern views which is not the direction in which all of God’s people were moving. Pope Francis’ radical image of the church as a field hospital brings the church back to its commandment and mission given by Jesus to love and serve others. As a Catholic in the United States, this view is incredibly important to know and embrace. Parishes in the US are down-sizing, merging into cluster parishes and participation in parish life is dwindling. As ministers, we must learn to break out of what feels most comfortable and bring the church into the community, being a field hospital to all.



9 Cupich, 72.

10 Ibid., 73.

11 Ibid., 74.

12 Ibid., 74.