

AN EMINENT HISTORIAN, BUT NOT VERY LOGICAL

A friend of the writer has remarked how each of the many critics of Vatican II, men of able intellect, demonstrates confusion in his thinking on the topic. This confusion is present in Roberto de Mattei's paper criticizing the reasoning advanced by Cardinal Zen against the Vatican's current policy of Ostpolitik in favour of Communist China,¹ a paper which bears the marks of having been written in haste. Before proceeding further we should enter a caveat: his paper was written in Italian and the reader of its English rendition must rely on the accuracy of the translation.

Professor de Mattei rightly condemns the proponents of Vatican II for having agreed, under the influence of the appalling Cardinal Casaroli, to comply with the demands of the Russian Communist state, as a condition of its principals allowing attendance at the Council's meetings of observers from the Moscow patriarchy, that no criticism of Communism should appear in the Council's documents. A reasonable man would be inclined to the view that this manifestation of moral weakness contradicted the assertion of Pope John XXIII that the Council's ruminations and determinations were to be guided by the Holy Spirit; contradicted, too, the assertion that the Council would be an ecumenical council.

Given his narration of the Council's pre-history one can follow the logic of Professor de Mattei's argument that it is naïve of Cardinal Zen to suggest that opposition to the current regime led by Pope Francis is, to be sought in the documents of Vatican II. But the Professor departs from logical principle on the more fundamental issue of the Council's legitimacy. This is what he says:

"The Holy Spirit... did not raise His voice against Communism. Therefore many historians and theologians are right... when they say the magisterial value and binding authority of the Conciliar texts has still to be discussed. Without excluding the idea that many of those documents might end up one day in the rubbish bin. But what is more important is that the Second Vatican Council is an historical event which cannot be reduced to muddled and ambiguous texts..."

And again, a little later:

"[A] Pope can fall into error, as has happened, and may still happen in history... If, however, a Pope can err, even more so can this be applied to a Council, which remains nonetheless a valid council. Valid, yes, but catastrophic, as was the twenty first Ecumenical Council of the Church."

When he says "The holy Spirit... did not raise His voice against Communism" he is either speaking what he thinks to be true, or he is speaking ironically. Either way he is casting doubt on the Council's integrity. But he contradicts himself when he insists that, even though "catastrophic", Vatican II was "nonetheless a valid Council".

"A Pope can err," he says. He is right, when the pope is not teaching formally on faith and morals to settle a controverted question and intending to bind the faithful. Likewise a council

¹ *An eminent Cardinal but not very prudent* at <https://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2020/08/de-mattei-eminent-cardinal-but-not-very.html>

(an ecumenical council) can err, but not when it is teaching formally on faith and morals, or settling a controverted question for the good of the Church. Professor de Mattei's support for the validity of the Second Vatican Council begs the question why it was convoked. The answer exposes the Council's character, for *what something is* (its essence, or formal cause) is determined by *its reason for existence* (its end, or final cause).

If we look at John XXIII's *opening speech* we find this:

"The salient point of this Council is not... a discussion of one article or another of the fundamental doctrine of the Church which has repeatedly been taught by the Fathers and by ancient and modern theologians, and which is presumed to be well known and familiar to all. For this a Council was not necessary..."²

Nothing here about faith or morals, or settling a question for the good of the Church. On the contrary, the Pope thinks there is no need of this justification.

If we tease out of what Pope Paul said at the Council's last general meeting on December 7th, 1965, such material as relates to the end for which the Council was convoked we read this:

"[T]he council devoted its attention not so much to divine truths, but rather, and principally, to the Church—her nature and composition, her ecumenical vocation, her apostolic and missionary activity... [T]he Church, has endeavoured to carry out an act of reflection about herself, to know herself better, to define herself better and, in consequence, to set aright what she feels and what she commands... The Church has gathered herself together in deep spiritual awareness, not to produce a learned analysis of religious psychology, or an account of her own experiences, not even to devote herself to reaffirming her rights and explaining her laws..."³

Nothing here, either, about faith or morals, or settling a question for the good of the Church.

There is a philosophical issue at stake. The *matter* of Vatican II was the meeting of bishops from all over the world. The Pope could bring them to Rome for any number of reasons. The *form* of Vatican II, which determined its character, was the reason for his gathering them together. If it was not to address some issue for the good of the Church, the Council was not an ecumenical one, no matter how vehemently the Pope may have asserted that it was.

This brings us back to Professor de Mattei's assertion that a pope can err. John XXIII did not comply with the conditions for infallibility when he said that the Second Vatican Council was an ecumenical council. Why, in the light of the above analyses, can it not be said that in doing so he erred? If he erred, no reasonable man would be surprised at the Council's "muddled and ambiguous texts", that many of its documents "might end up... in the rubbish bin" or that it may rightly be referred to as "catastrophic"?

Michael Baker

August 15th, 2020—*Assumption of the Blessed Virgin*

² Opening Speech in *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M Abbott S J, General Editor; London, 1966, p.710 at p. 715.

³ https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651207_epilogo-concilio.html