

The Vatican Council Prelude to Unity

By GARY MacEOIN
(Special to The Courier)

Pope John was extraordinarily vague about what he expected from the Ecumenical Council he announced in 1959 and convened in October 1962. The most often told (though unsubstantiated) story is that, with a symbolism more characteristic of his successor, he once threw open a window and said: "That's what I want, to let in a little fresh air."

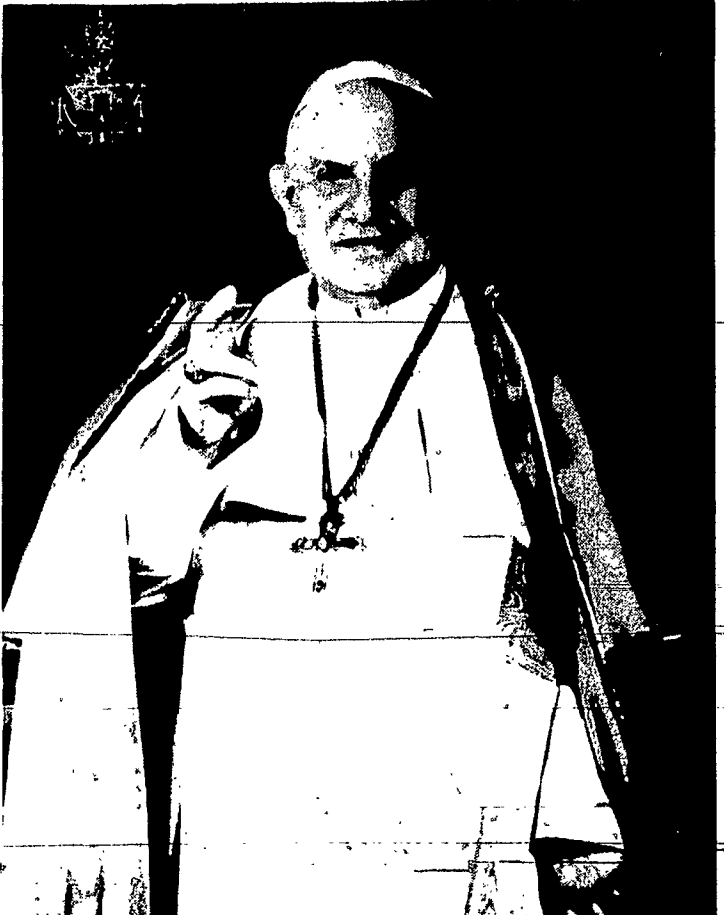
More broadly, I think he realized his dilemma. The functioning of the Church had been atrophied by the concentration of all decision-making in the head, a violation of the principle of subsidiarity which he was to describe in "Mater et Magistra" (Following Pius XI) as "a fundamental principle of social philosophy, fixed and unchangeable." He knew what he wanted from the Council only in the sense that he wanted the Church to tell him what he as its head was supposed to be doing, and what everyone else was supposed to be doing.

There was, nevertheless, one element in the reform, the updating of the "aggiornamento" desired by John which he regarded as of such priority that he was not afraid to put in a plug for it, much as he was determined not to prejudice the methods by which it would be brought about. The Council, he said repeatedly, would prepare the way for the reunion of Christianity.

The proposal in those broad terms created no problem. Unity of his followers had been Christ's dying wish. "That they may be one," he prayed his Father at his last meal with his disciples. (John 17:11) Unity of Christians had been the objective of many councils, Lyons, Florence, Trent, Pius XI had not only reaffirmed it when summoning the first Vatican Council in 1868. He had formulated the procedures. Unity was to be achieved, he said, by the return of "Protestants and other non-Catholics" to the one true fold of Christ, namely, the Roman Catholic Church.

That intransigent position had remained official from 1870 to 1962. The development of the unity movement among Protestants from the beginning of the 20th century was widely interpreted by Catholics as evidence of a decline of belief among the Churches issued from the Reformation, a subordination of dogma to expedience. Even when the Orthodox joined the World Council of Churches under a formula fully protective of doctrinal principles, Catholic held aloof. That way, they intimated, lay not unity but religious indifferentism.

I do not think that any of the surprises of the Council was as great as the revelation that the previously conceived thinking of the Church on this issue was at complete variance with official professions and practices.



Pope John has given his name to our era — a time when people of different races and creeds began to respect one another. He convened the historic Vatican Council in 1962 but died in 1963, two years before it concluded its sessions.

Catholics at all levels, and particularly the top theologians and many bishops, had come to see the sterility of our attitude, its lack of humility, its misunderstanding of the meaning of Christianity. They were ready to recognize that Catholics shared the blame for division, that they had much to learn from other Christians and even from those who were not Christian at all.

Most of the great theologians of the Council's sixteen documents, and a substantial majority of the Fathers were willing to face these unpalatable facts and to act accordingly. Their willingness is reflected to a varying extent in every one of the Council's sixteen documents, and not only in the decree on ecumenism, the one devoted directly and primarily to the issue. It was never far away from the concerns of the Council, whether it was considering the nature of the Church, the nature of belief among the Churches, the nature of the Reformation, a subordination of dogma to expedience. Even when the Orthodox joined the World Council of Churches under a formula fully protective of doctrinal principles, Catholic held aloof. That way, they intimated, lay not unity but religious indifferentism.

From the outset, this majority position was opposed by an intransigent minority unwilling to make any change in the positions established before the Council. This minority had a substantial measure of control of the elaborate and outdated machinery of the Council through its entrenched position in the central organs of the Church. Its influence is reflected in almost every decision of

the veneration of statues) which might "create confusion among the Christian people and promote a faulty sense of devotion."

More basic issues were raised in the decree on the nature of the Church, and here again the major decisions improved the ecumenical atmosphere. Its most significant contributions are possibly the transfer of emphasis from the legalistically conceived hierarchy to the spiritual unity of the members of the Church, and the recognition that the grace and sacrament of Christ can be found in other Christian Churches and communities, and that even those who are not Christians are related to the people of God and play a part in promoting the kingdom of Christ.

Also important for relations both with the Orthodox and with Protestants is the proclamation of the collegiality of the bishops, providing a perspective previously lacking in which to understand the infallibility of the Pope proclaimed by the first Vatican Council.

Infallibility is no longer isolated as a personal prerogative of the Pope. It is seen rather as a service performed by him as head of the college of bishops which Christ made "the subject of supreme and full power over the universal Church."

The upgrading of the laity as full members of the people of God and the express affirmation of their common priesthood in Baptism, as presented in the constitution on the Church and in the decrees on the liturgy and the lay apostolate, also served to meet legitimate criticisms of the Reformers.

The decree on revelation again forced the Council to think in ecumenical terms. The first draft was entitled "The sources of revelation," thus presenting an issue basic to Catholic-Protestant polemics. For Protestants, all revealed truth is contained in the Scriptures. Catholics since Trent tended to treat Tradition as a separate and perhaps more important source. The final text skirted the issue by presenting Scripture and Tradition not as two complementary channels through which a single divine revelation is given to man.

Helpful also was the clarification in this decree of the meaning of inspiration and inerrancy in the Scriptures. While reaffirming that the Scriptures are truly and fully the word of God, teaching divine truth without error, the Council approved a full and objective evaluation of the historical, literary and scientific realities. It acknowledged that there is no absolute way to interpret the Scriptures, that new insights can be gained by the faithful in each age, under the inspiration of the Spirit and in keeping with the intellectual progress of mankind.

A constant and justified Protestant criticism of Roman Catholic practice was also met in the decree on revelation. It positively encouraged the reading of the Scriptures by all Catholics in their own language. "Let all the faithful," it said, "come to an outstanding knowledge of Jesus Christ by the constant reading of the Scriptures."

The evaluation of these many aspects of Catholic relations with other believers prepared the minds of the Council Fathers for the direct confrontation required by the decree on ecumenism. The result was that, increased importance given to the Scriptures in the "service of the word," the reintroduction in principle of reception of the Eucharist under both kinds, the recognition that the liturgy must be adapted to the circumstances and cultures of each country, the encouragement of communal singing, the deemphasizing of practices (such as



New Orleans — Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Jewish religious leaders take time out for a coffee break during a visit to the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral in New Orleans as part of the city's "Operation Understanding — 1965." Seated from left are: Rabbi Julian Felbman of Temple Sinai, president of the New Orleans Rabbinical Association; Greek Orthodox Bishop Silas of New Orleans; Catholic Archbishop John P. Cody of New Orleans; Episcopal Bishop Girault M. Jones of Louisiana; the Rev. George Wilson, executive secretary of the New Orleans Federation of Churches; and Dean William Gaines of the host cathedral. With back to camera is Father Earl C. Woods, secretary to Archbishop Cody. The Catholic prelate inaugurated the annual "open house" at the city's churches and synagogues in 1964.

Ecumenical Coffee-break

The Catholic Church, as an institution here on earth is not perfect, it says. On the contrary, Christ has summoned it "to continual reformation." The statement helped greatly to eliminate the triumphalism which had long been a barrier to dialogue with Protestants. Previously, Catholics had started from the premise that all the fault was on the other side, a position that really left nothing to discuss.

Another important concession was the identification of the Protestant bodies as "Churches and ecclesial communities." Catholics had previously insisted that the groups which separated from Rome in the 16th century had ceased absolutely to participate in the Church of Christ. Individual members in good faith could lead a life of grace, but the body was not of a vehicle to carry that grace to its members.

The decree, on the contrary, recognizes a true Christian life in the bodies as such. "Some and even most of the significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself can exist outside the boundaries of the Catholic Church," the written word of God: the life of grace, faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, and visible elements too. All of these, which come from Christ and lead back to Christ, belong by right to the one Church of Christ. The brethren divided from us also use many liturgical actions of the Christian religion. These most certainly can engender a life of grace in ways

that vary according to the condition of each Church or community. These liturgical actions must be regarded as capable of giving access to the community of salvation."

Once it was admitted that a Church not in formal union with Rome could be a channel of grace for its members, the issue of worship in common had to be faced. Here the decree makes a distinction, at least for practical purposes, between the Orthodox Churches and those which separated from Rome in the 16th century. The Orthodox "possess true sacraments, and above all, by apostolic succession, the priesthood and the Eucharist, whereby they are linked with us in closest intimacy. Therefore some worship in common (communicatio in sacris), given suitable circumstances and the approval of Church authority, is not merely possible but to be encouraged."

As explained by Cardinal Lercaro of Bologna in a talk at the Greek College in Rome, attended by Orthodox observers at the Council, the decree permits and in appropriate circumstances encourages worship in common in the fullest sense, that is today, participation in celebrating the Eucharist. Such is already the practice in some countries in which the Orthodox and Eastern Churches in formal union with Rome co-exist. The action by which Pope Paul and Archbishop Athenagoras last December cancelled the mutual excommunications formulated in 1054 will undoubtedly help to extend that practice.

I believe that future histor-

ians will agree that the rift between Orthodox and Rome has in fact been already healed, without assigning a specific date to the ending of the schism. They will recognize that by the action of Christ's grace we gradually grew together, renewing and enriching each other in the process.

The healing of the division between Catholic and Protestant will, I believe, follow a similar pattern. The Council itself stopped far short of a general approval of Catholic participation in Protestant worship. It said, nevertheless, that worship in common is a witness to the unity of the Church and a sharing in the means of grace. Insofar as it is a witness to unity, it cannot be permitted between those who in fact are not united; but insofar as it is a sharing in the means of grace, it may at times be commended. The full meaning of the second clause has, I believe, not yet been fully explored. It seems to anticipate a sharing of our respective religious experiences and practices which cannot but further the desired goal of unity.

The form of service used by Pope Paul and the Protestant observers in the last days of the Council has served as a guide

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line for subsequent experiments. Consisting of prayers, hymns and Scripture readings, it was basically "the liturgy of the word" which "forms the first part of the Mass. Up to now, I know of no concrete proposal for participation in the celebration" (Continued on Page 17B)

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Vatican Council Unity Prelude

Continued from Page 1

tion of the Eucharist or commemoration of the Last Supper. I believe, nevertheless, that logic of the decree must us in this direction.

Like the Orthodox, some of the Churches issued from the Reformation possess true sacraments, including the priest and the Eucharist, and enjoy apostolic succession, principles enunciated by Cardinal Lercaro for the Orthodox have equal validity for the

Nor is the possibility of ing in commemoration of the Last Supper excluded even those Churches and ecclesial communities which do not may not possess sacraments, we understand them. For decree insists that "when commemorate the Lord's per, they profess that it is life in communion with Christ and they await his ing in glory."

Such developments may be too far ahead in northern Europe (Germany, France, the Low Countries), the region in which the Reformation began. Thanks to the non suffering endured in World Wars and the persecutions of Fascist and Red torships, Christians there covered each other in shelters, jails and concentration camps. Elsewhere, the tion will take more time.

In the United States, Catholics and Protestants live pably as citizens, but they little understanding of the lital values each holds for other. There is no doubt since the Council we have more contacts. But much mains superficial, at the of politeness rather than of confrontation.

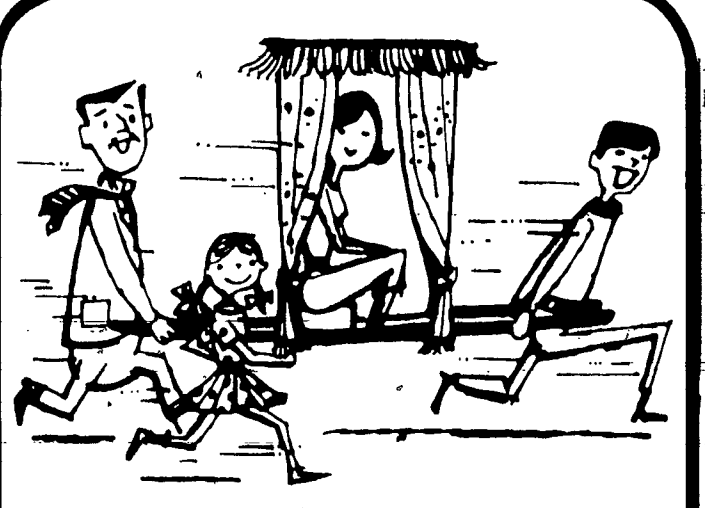
The Council opened up another ecumenical era, the eological implications of which I have as yet not explored anywhere. Its sment about the Jews in the laration on the relationship the Church to non-Christian ligious does more than col beliefs commonly held by olies.

By stressing the "spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews," it poses the lenge of a return by Christians to worship in the synagogue was in the synagogue that I taught and worshipped. apostles decided at the Council of Jerusalem that the converts were not bound the prescriptions of the la Moses, but they never suggested that it was improper to low them. Here, it seems to we have a fruitful unexplored area for ecumenical medita and action.



Golden Jubilee

MR. AND MRS. NORBERT F. TRABOLD of Coldwater Road, celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary on May 6. The couple was married fifty years ago, May 1st in St. Boniface Church, by the late Monsignor John F. Boppel. A Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated by their son, Father Alphonsus Trabold, O.F.M. of St. Bonaventure University. A reception at the Party House on Beahan Road was given by their children. Besides Father Trabold, there are two daughters, Miss Vera J. Trabold and Mrs. Edward B. Moreland. There are seven grandchildren. Mr. Trabold was in the floor covering business for many years. He is retired from the E. W. Edwards Co.

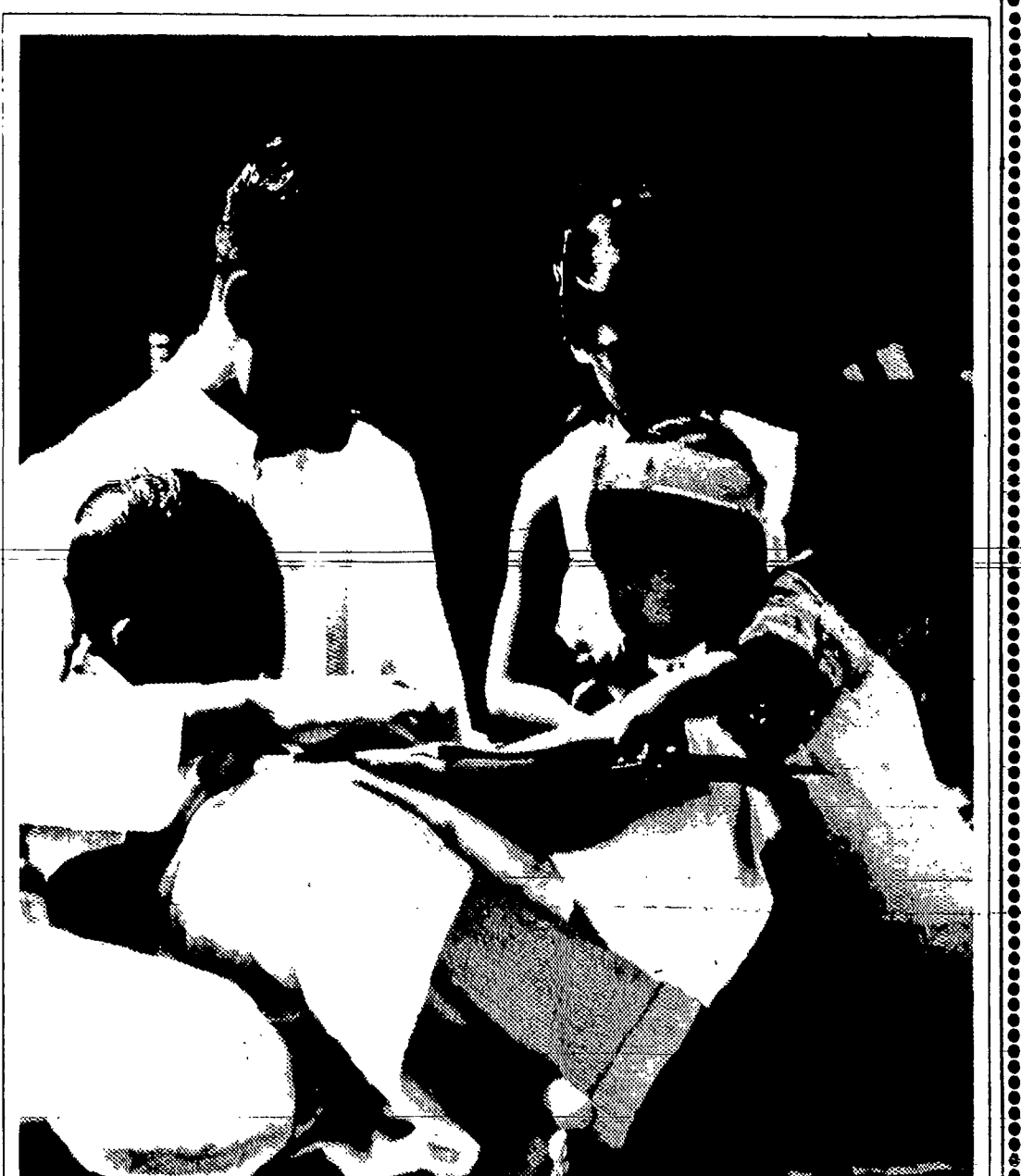


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