

The Long-awaited Implementation of the Spirit of the Second Vatican Council

by Emilio G. Chávez

The Roman Catholic Church, governed by the clergy with an iron hand, a clergy who at times seems to shepherd primarily itself, felt besieged by the nationalistic Italian forces in the last part of the nineteenth century. The Church had opposed the unification of Italy and had defended its feudal estates, and entrenched, with very few bishops in attendance, convened the First Vatican Council and conferred on its head, the Pope, all the power it could under the circumstances. It was the culmination of the clericalization process, perhaps begun in earnest with Pope Gregory VII in the eleventh century.

A simple though astute man, from peasant stock, named Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, became a priest, and was blessed with the mentoring of a progressive shepherd, the bishop of Bergamo, Giacomo Radini-Tedeschi. Roncalli learned to be open-minded, and that knowing history was important, as he strove earnestly for sanctity.

Roncalli was sent to Rome, but he did not fit in well in that bureaucracy. He was sent off to Bulgaria, then Turkey, that is, far-away places for an outsider. Fate, the Lord's providence, had larger plans. Fortuitously, the complacent if not cowardly stance of many prelates in Nazi-dominated France made Charles de Gaulle expel many of them, and a papal nuncio was urgently needed in Paris. Roncalli was appointed: a surprise. It was the late fifties, and he came upon, in his reading, Yves Congar's book "True and False Reform in the Church," and with surprise asked, "Is it possible to reform the Church?" The next rung for the now elderly Roncalli in the Church hierarchy was to become Patriarch of Venice, a prestigious but uninfluential post.

After the heavy-handed pontificate of Pius XII, it was unclear who should be elected pope. Roncalli was elected as a non-descript, old, avuncular and simple man who could symbolically head a short transition period until the cards fell more into place. But Roncalli, now Pope John XXIII, convened an ecumenical council instead. To reform the Church. He had chosen the name John for personal reasons, and did not care that the last John XXIII had been an anti-pope.

The first thing this outsider did was to send out a questionnaire to all the bishops in the world, to get their ideas as to how the Church could reach out to others, to not look just at its belly-button, but to seek out the lost sheep, and to accompany fellow seekers of a better world in

friendship and dialogue, irrespective of personal creeds. The bishops were only too pleased to be consulted, to have a voice, after the First Vatican Council seemed to have given the Pope all-inclusive authority to decide everything. And new knowledge was the order of the day: the formerly silenced Congar now read in the paper that he had been named a *peritus* by the man who had read his book and was now Pope! An overnight rehabilitation; what a surprising change. Congar and others who had also been banned in the latter years of Pius XII now could not stop to take a breath, as they were enlisted by bishops eager to learn, fascinated with the new knowledge that things had been done in many different ways in the history of the Church, if one only knew it well enough.

But the plenipotentiary papal office did not really, could not really, run everything. For this governance of the Church it needed the Curia. These bureaucrats and careerists were the ones who ran the Church in the day to day, ostensibly as the great defenders of the pope. But they held on to their power; they had possession of the Church's headquarters, and they did not look benignly on all the desire for reform. They now tried to thwart the new pope's project, but the critical mass of bishops, once arrived in Rome, were able to overcome this minority's maneuverings, with some discreet but unmistakable support, of course, from the outsider pope who had convened the new council.

Great debates, open expression of ideas and knowledge, took place during the sessions of the Council. It was clear that the many bishops with their experts were unwilling to bend before the heavy-hand of prelates like Cardinal Ottaviani, head of the "Supreme" congregation, before whom everything had to be submitted for approval, had he continued to have his way. It was a clear defeat for the adamant minority. Once you get a "critical mass" of people, even of prelates, common sense and decency and some grasp on reality, prevails.

But Pope John did not live to see the end of the Council. He was succeeded by an intelligent and sensitive but indecisive pope, not bold enough to think outside the box and take the bull by the horns and implement the Council and make its spirit continue to give life. He did not want either side, the majority nor the minority, to be able to claim victory, as when Solomon threatened to divide the baby in half. His troubled pontificate led to a mysterious election (of Pope John Paul I) followed by two heavy-handed reigns who sought to rein in what they took to be the unacceptable excesses of the Council. The use of "spirit" as applied to the Council was

frowned upon. The Church should limit its damage, they thought, by sticking to the letter of the documents; there was no such “spirit.”

The entrenched clericalism led to its inevitable consequences. The Curia, unreformed, was rampant with abuse and intrigue, all under the nose of an aloof Pope confident of it. Pope Benedict resigned, now aware that his was another epoch, that he had at last not understood all the changes going on in the world and in the Church, for all his time in his study.

With detailed knowledge of the state of things in the Vatican, the critical-mass of cardinals elected an outsider from the ends of the earth, and he took a wholly new name, that of the universally loved Francis, the poor, poetic, holy hippie. He gathered reform-minded cardinal helpers to assist him in finally reforming the Curia, its bank, the Church. And he sent out questionnaires to find out what people really thought. He loves Pope Roncalli. May he, may we, live to see real reform in the Church: something Roncalli had wondered if it was possible.