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George A. Lindbeck
Lutheran Foundation

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BRIEF STUDIES

REFORM, BUT SLOW AND CAUTIOUS

By George A. Lindbeck

(This report was released by the News Bureau of the National Lutheran Council. Dr. Lindbeck, on leave from Yale University Divinity School to serve as research professor of the Lutheran Foundation for Interconfessional Research, is an LWF delegate observer to the Second Vatican Council.)

"Renewal" and "reform" continued to be the watchwords of the current Roman Catholic Vatican Council during its second session in Rome, which adjourned in early December. The moderate optimism expressed after the first session by most non-Roman-Catholic delegate observers and guests is still justified. A majority of the bishops are still in favor of major changes in the Roman Church. So also—apparently—is the new pope, Paul VI, even though his personality and style of action are very different from that of the late John XXIII. The way is still being "prepared for great and encouraging changes in the Roman Catholic Church," as I wrote in my report of the first session.

Yet the mood after this second session is far less enthusiastic than after the first. Many of the bishops and observers express some disappointment. They had hoped that more would be accomplished. Three schemata were inconclusively debated: on the church, on the government of the dioceses, and on ecumenicism. Two—on the liturgy and on "Instruments of Social Communication"—which had been discussed in the first session, were amended, approved, and promulgated in final form. That leaves 12 schemata still outstanding. At the present rate it would take four or more years to finish the council. Obviously the bishops do not relish the burden of spending several months of every year at Rome away from their normal duties.

However, they are disturbed not only by

the slowness of proceedings, but even more by the cause of this slowness. The conservative minority is making it difficult to get a program of reform through the council. To be sure, those who are opposed to change are no longer trying to impose their own reactionary schemata on the rest of the bishops as they did at the beginning of the council. They discovered in the first session, and again in this, that they simply do not have the votes.

On only one issue they came close to winning, and even then they failed. They pressed for a separate schema on the Virgin Mary which, while not containing any new dogmas, would still have emphasized her role more than has been done in any equally authoritative document. They wished, in other words, to support officially some of the more extreme forms of Marian devotion which prevail in some areas. However, they were defeated by 1,114 votes to 1,074. Instead of having an independent schema, it was decided simply to include a Marian statement in the schema on the church. We do not yet know what this statement will say, but those favoring it generally hope that it will limit what were called, even in the debates in St. Peter's, "the excesses of the cult of the Blessed Virgin." It will, of course, in no sense disavow the Roman dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, and consequently it will not be satisfactory from the viewpoint of non-Roman-Catholic Christians, but there is reason to hope that it will serve to check Mariolatry and perhaps even help to diminish it.

Most Bishops Favor Decentralization, Democratization

On other issues the conservative strength has been smaller, ranging between 300 and 600 votes. Yet this minority has been able

to slow progress, and there is anxiety that it may even be able permanently to block some advances which the great majority of bishops are willing to approve.

The great majority accept principles which, if put into practice, would make the Roman Church much less a highly centralized, absolute monarchy and give it a decentralized, somewhat democratic and much more pastoral character. They affirm that the college of bishops, as long as it is in union with the pope, has supreme authority in the church. They favor much greater participation by the laity in many aspects of the church's work and administration. They would like to see the Vatican bureaucracy, the Curia, lose much of its power, and they call for major reforms in the secret and often oppressive ways in which the Holy Office handles accusations of heresy. According to some, the Index of Forbidden Books should be abolished. Deacons should be reinstated as a permanent order of clergy who would, in many cases, probably be married. All these reforms could be made because they do not contradict any of the Roman dogmas. The emphasis on the authority of the college of bishops, for example, can be reconciled with papal infallibility if the latter is reinterpreted. Thus, from the point of view of most of the bishops, there is nothing subversive about these changes, and yet the conservatives are resisting them bitterly. Some will almost certainly be adopted in future sessions of the council, but the final decisions may fall far behind the hopes of the majority.

In regard to relations with non-Christians a similar situation exists. The schema on ecumenism, which was discussed this past autumn, is less advanced than some Roman Catholics would like. For example, it carefully avoids calling Protestant denominations churches, and for this it was criticized by several bishops in St. Peter's. Nor does this schema confess that Roman Catholics may

share the blame for Christian divisions, even though the pope himself made this confession in the opening speech of the session and again when he received the non-Roman observers in a private audience. In short, this is a cautious schema, whose ideas, even from the ecumenical Roman Catholic point of view, are too much influenced by the last four centuries of defensive theology. Yet it was severely criticized by the conservatives. Its spirit was too ecumenical for them. Their criticism was muted, perhaps in part because of the presence of those of us who were non-Catholic observers, but it was quite clear that they thought it was too kind to the "separated brethren."

And, indeed, it is easy enough to understand their attitude, for there are multitudes of Protestants who would object if a Protestant document were to speak with equal Christian love and generosity about Roman Catholics. This Roman Catholic schema is unflinchingly respectful and appreciative of the Christian character of Orthodox and Protestants. It praises them, sometimes more highly than they deserve, for their love of Christ, their reverence for Scripture, their works of Christian charity and social justice. It exhorts Roman Catholics in truly moving language to love and strive to understand their fellow Christians. In short, its spirit is unflinchingly ecumenical, even though its ideas—its theology—should be improved, in the opinion of many of the bishops. However, in view of the conservative opposition, it is doubtful that these improvements will be made.

Minority Still Exercises Decisive Power

The conservatives also attacked the chapters on religious liberty and on the Jews which were attached to this schema on ecumenism. To be sure, the opposition to the statement against antisemitism was partly political, prompted by the hostility of Christian and Muslim Arabs against the new state

of Israel, while the opposition to the declaration in favor of religious liberty was more a matter of traditionalistic theology and was more widespread. Nevertheless, even the Theological Commission, despite its conservative leadership, voted 18 to 5 in favor of the affirmation of religious liberty. Probably both these statements will eventually be approved, yet here also a recalcitrant minority is delaying, and will perhaps succeed in weakening, decisions which the majority favor.

The obstructive power of this minority comes in part from its control of key positions in the Curia and in the council itself. It can therefore frustrate the will of the majority, just as can a minority in a parliamentary organization such as the U.S. Congress when it controls strategic committee chairmanships. Another factor which gives the minority power is the importance of unity and, if possible, "moral unanimity" for a council of the Roman Catholic Church. There is great reluctance to take any action which is strongly opposed by hundreds of bishops, even when they represent only 15 to 30 percent of the total.

Possibly only the pope can effectively break the deadlock. If he were to take a strong, public stand in favor of concrete reforms, no doubt many obstructionists would yield. However, the danger of this is that he would then be interfering with the freedom of the council. So far he does not seem to have decided what to do. He appears to be in favor of the forces of renewal, but his support has been limited to general pronouncements and to half measures which leave uncertain the extent to which the council will carry out even those reforms which are acceptable to most bishops.

It is for this reason that a rather sober mood prevails among many bishops and observers at the end of this second session. They are afraid that the council may prove to be less successful than it could be.

Yet this does not mean that it is threatened with failure. It has already transformed the atmosphere in the Roman Church in many ways. It has produced concrete results in the form of the two schemata which were approved at this last session. To be sure, one of them, that on "Instruments of Social Communication," is poorly done, almost trivial in its platitudinous traditionalism, but the one on the liturgy marks a milestone in the history of Roman Catholicism. If its principles are put fully into practice, it may well, in the course of a few decades, make Roman Catholic worship far more Biblical in both form and content.

We see, then, that both excessive optimism and excessive pessimism must be avoided. On the one hand, we must remember that the reforms now taking place are strictly limited. They do not disavow any of the dogmas against which Protestants rightly protest, although they may involve noteworthy changes in interpretation. Humanly speaking, they do not even increase the possibility of Christian unity in the foreseeable future, even though they may lead to greatly improved relations between the confessions. Yet, on the other hand, this council is encouraging Biblical movements in worship and theology; it is stimulating ecumenicism, religious liberty, and more evangelical mission and service to the world. There can be no doubt that the Holy Spirit is working mightily in the Roman Catholic Church at the present time, and for this we must both pray and praise God.