

Intro: The roots of ACTA, like the Council called by Pope John, go back into the long tradition of the Church. Fr Anthony Boylan at the ACTA open meeting of April 2013 reminded us why the Council was called and where its work remains to be continued and developed.

WHY POPE JOHN CALLED THE COUNCIL

The Year of Faith is now half over, and we remind ourselves **why this Year**: to mark 50 years since the opening of the Second Vatican Council, and 20 years since the publication of the new edition of the *Catechism*. Strong emphasis has been placed upon the latter anniversary, overshadowing the former and much more significant one – more significant because on its publication the *Catechism* was seen as an additional fruit of the Council. In the words of Pope John Paul II, the *Catechism* was intended to make “a very important contribution to the work of renewing the whole life of the Church as desired and begun by the Second Vatican Council.”

Pope John XXIII had called the Council three years before this earlier anniversary we are marking. He set down clearly why he had done so. His desire was for a renewal of the whole Church [*Aggiornamento* was his gentle Italian word for it: “bringing-up-to-date”]. He wanted it for two purposes. The first was that this renewal was the necessary preliminary to the task of rebuilding the unity between Christians, according to the will of Jesus himself. We certainly caught his message at the time: the renewal of the Church was a means to an end, not an end in itself. His second and more radical purpose was that rebuilding the unity of the Church was necessary to ensure that the Church would become a much more effective instrument for taking the message of the Gospel to the modern world. To achieve those two purposes, he believed that the Church had to journey through a major overhaul. Renewal of the Church leading to the Reunion of Christendom leading to a renewed Evangelization was the huge agenda he put before the whole Church.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council responded to that agenda with extraordinary vigour. They began their work by mapping out first how the *interior* life of the Church was to be renewed through a renewal of its liturgy, and why: because our liturgy is “the outstanding means by which the faithful can express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church.” The ‘Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy’, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, was the first document to be published (4th Dec., 1963). In many ways it was the germ of their most important document, *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, published a year later.

One of the intentions of that document was to complete and redress the imbalanced teaching presented by the First Vatican Council almost a century before. That Council was hastily adjourned on account of the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war and the invasion of the Papal States. It had planned a ‘Constitution on the Church of Christ’ in fifteen chapters, but the adjournment only allowed the first four to be promulgated – the ones describing the primacy and infallibility of the Pope.

Those chapters lacked any treatment of the other bishops and members of the Church. That was why many critics of that Council maintained that it had converted the Catholic Church into an absolute monarchy, in which the other bishops would be mere lackeys of the Pope.

Lumen Gentium certainly redresses that imbalance not only by its teaching on the collective responsibility of the whole “college” of bishops along with the Pope for the tasks of the entire Church, but by its teaching on the biblical notion of the Church as the People of God, which gives a new and creative approach to the role of **all** the members of the Church: laity, priests and religious as well as the bishops and the pope.

In the century between the two Vatican Councils, consistent with the incomplete teaching in Vatican I about the Primacy of the Pope, the power of the Roman Curia grew and grew. Very sadly, the balancing view of the true nature of the Church, found in *Lumen Gentium*, has yet to become the reality. Its practical implementation has been obstructed consistently by a central bureaucracy that has ignored and undermined this teaching to protect its own interests, and by the failure of two popes to address the problem. That has had the unfortunate effect of inhibiting serious dialogue at any level within the Church, has put important aspects of the renewal of the Church on hold, has created a real obstacle to progress in ecumenical dialogue, and has impeded the agenda that Pope John placed before the whole Church more than 50 years ago.

The election of Pope Francis and the early waves he has already made, especially in his latest initiative announced only last week, give us reasons for optimism that he genuinely wishes to lead the whole Church once again towards the agenda Pope John set before us. It seems to me that this is a good time for real dialogue throughout the whole Church, because she is *OUR* Church, all of us belong to her, and we love her.

Rev Mgr Anthony B Boylan