

The Second Vatican Council as Roman Catholic answer to the Reformation

Angelo Maffeis

An answer that came late

In the title of this paper it is stated that Second Vatican Council can be understood as a Roman Catholic answer – whether it is the answer or an answer it is still to be decided – to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. If this statement is true, we must recognize that this answer came rather late. In fact, there had also been a response to the Reformation in the sixteenth century and it was framed by the controversial theology and by the Council of Trent which defined the standards of Catholic faith and traced the lines of a clear program of reform of Church structures. The thesis stated in the title seems therefore to imply that with Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church tries to formulate an answer to the questions raised by the Reformation which does not have a predominantly negative character, but which is able to recognize the truth and the legitimacy of some fundamental issues put forward by the Reformation.

In fact, the response of the Council of Trent remained in many respects below the level of the theological question raised by the Reformation. The Fathers of Trent did not consider to be their task to accept the challenge to enter a theological dispute with the Reformers. An interesting clue to this attitude is the intervention of the Archbishop of Rossano Giambattista Castagna (the future Pope Urban VII) in the final stage of the conciliar discussion on the Eucharistic sacrifice. In a *votum* of 11 August 1562, he declares that it is not appropriate to put a doctrinal exposition beforehand, and then to formulate the canons because this way of proceeding does not correspond to the way of teaching of ancient councils. Furthermore, if the *rationes* given as a foundation of the teaching are weak, the teaching of the Council is weakening, too. If then the *auctoritates* proposed are subject to different interpretations, the judgment remains doubtful. Finally, if the reasons are false, the judgment is worthless.

“We see therefore that it does not correspond to the nature of judgment to state the reasons in the judgment (*de ratione iudicii non esse, ut rationes in sententia deducantur*). We sit as judges; unless the reasons we produce in the doctrine are very clear and irreproachable, unless the authorities we propose are very strong, I am afraid that while we want to transmit the doctrine, it happens that we give reason to doubt to someone and throw some qualms into his soul”¹.

According to Castagna, heretics should not be given the opportunity of interpreting, glossing, contradicting the doctrines proposed, but the council must speak only in the judicial language of the canons. Furthermore, the arguments and proofs taken from tradition do not convince heretics at all: they do not recognize its authority. The doctrinal exposition is not very useful even for Catholics for whom, more than the doctrine, the liturgical tradition must be eloquent.

This policy was not strictly followed by the Council of Trent, which indeed gives its teaching the form of canons that condemn the doctrine of the Reformers, but in many cases also offers a positive exposition of the Catholic doctrine. If one considers the overall teaching of Trent, however, it is not possible to escape the impression that it is deeply affected by the anti-Protestant polemic. This attitude was not only an obstacle for a fair and balanced judgment of the protestant doctrine, but it prevented also the recognition of elements truly belonging to the Catholic tradition of faith, which could have been perceived as a surrendering to the position of the Reformers.

¹ *Concilium Tridentinum. Diariorum, Actorum, Epistularum, Tractatum Nova Collectio. Edidit Societas Goerresiana. Tomus octavus. Actorum pars quinta*, Herder, Freiburg in Breisgau 1919, 758.

It can be observed, for example, that in the debate on the decree on Church orders it has been repeatedly made the attempt to integrate the preaching of the gospel among the tasks of the ordained ministry, but that attempt has been rejected for fear of favouring an interpretation of the Church's ministry reduced to the function of preaching. In the draft of the *doctrina* of October 1562, preaching is recognized as belonging to the priestly functions, although its exercise is not required from everyone: "we must not deny that the *ministerium verbi* is convenient to the priests, but they do not stop being priests if they do not exercise that function, as evidenced by the Apostle who says that the presbyters who preside well, especially those who work in word and doctrine, are worthy of a double honor"². In the draft revised after discussion the reference to the *ministerium verbi* disappears leaving place only to a reference to the "power, transmitted to the apostles and their successors in the priesthood, to consecrate, offer and administer Christ's body and blood as well as to forgive and retain the sins and to do the other things that are part of his task (*et cetera, quae sui muneris sunt*)"³. In the final text the reference to other ministerial functions (*cetera*) also disappears and only a reference to the Eucharist and Penance remains⁴.

The reform decrees, on the other hand, underline the importance of preaching and adopt measures which aim at ensuring a better quality of preaching and pastors really dedicated to the ministry. Since the reform decree published in the V session (17 June 1546), a program of biblical formation for the clergy has been outlined. In order to promote the understanding and the study of the Bible, the Council stipulates that in the churches with a benefice for the teaching of theology, the holder should also carry out the task to explain the Scriptures; in all the other churches with a large number of clergy and where such a prebend does not exist, an office for Bible lecture should be established. The decree also insists on the duty of preaching which is the main task of the bishops (*praecipuum episcoporum munus*), but also a duty for all those engaged in the care of souls⁵. In spite of this emphasis, preaching is not explicitly mentioned in the dogmatic definition of the Church's ministry, which merely cites the power of consecration of the Eucharist and forgiving sins in the sacrament of Penance.

The example above illustrates one of the problems met by the Roman Catholic Church in formulating a response to the Reformation: the dogmatic definition is conditioned by the fear of endorsing a Protestant position and the reform of the ministry cannot find an adequate foundation in the theology of ministry. The consequence is the inability to formulate a clear and coherent view of the ministry, which includes its theological foundation and the forms of its real exercise in the Church.

On this issue, certainly the response given by Vatican II was at a higher level because the effort to keep together the theological and the pastoral perspective could attain better results than at the Council of Trent. It is enough to mention the close connection established by the Constitution *Lumen Gentium* between the sacrament of Order and the functions and ministries that derive from the sacrament. These functions are described with the scheme of the threefold ministry of the word, of the sacrament and of the pastoral leadership. In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church it is then stated that "Episcopal consecration, together with the office of sanctifying, also confers the office of teaching and of governing, which, however, of its very nature, can be exercised only in

² CT IX, 39. The text revised by Girolamo Seripando is even stronger: «*Et quamvis certum semper et indubitatum fuerit, ministerium quoque verbi sacerdotibus convenire: sacerdotes tamen esse non desinunt, tametsi munus hoc iusto aliquo impedimento non exercent, cum Apostolus non solum presbyteros, qui laborant in verbo et doctrina, verum etiam et eos qui alias bene praesunt, duplici honore dignos censeat*» (CT IX, 41).

³ CT IX, 105-106.

⁴ Cfr. CT IX, 620.

⁵ Cfr. *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, 669.

hierarchical communion with the head and the members of the college”⁶.

It is also worthy mentioning that Vatican II abandons the language of the canons condemning the positions incompatible with Catholic faith and formulates its teaching in a positive way.

What allowed the Second Vatican Council to formulate a more appropriate response to the questions raised by the Reformation? This was made possible because the event of the Reformation and the questions raised by the Reformers were not in the foreground and, unlike what had happened in the sixteenth century, they were not immediately perceived as a challenge that called into question essential elements of the Catholic faith. The response given by Vatican II was therefore an indirect one. The teaching of the last Council responded to the Reformation through the effort of recovering aspects of the faith tradition that had been forgotten – the movement of the return to the sources – and through the effort of adapting the languages, structures and forms of the ecclesial presence to the needs of a world undergoing deep changes (*aggiornamento*). Especially the first movement and a new appreciation of the Scripture and of the authoritative witness of the ancient Church allowed to recover elements of the faith and the Church practice forgotten over the centuries or overshadowed because of the need to oppose polemically to the adversary of the moment. The study of the Scripture, the authority of the Church fathers, along with a less selective and unilateral listening to the tradition of faith, made possible what objectively represents a reception of some concerns of the Reformers.

In the decades before Vatican II, a lively debate between Catholic and Protestant theology took place, and in this context, in some theologians and Church leaders it gained ground the conviction that the Catholic Church had something to learn from the Protestant Reformation and that through the witness of the Churches of the Reformation also Catholics could discover anew some genuine elements of the Christian message. This conviction is also expressed by some conciliar fathers at Vatican II, who recall the ecumenical significance of certain issues discussed by the assembly as well as the need to take into account the views and concerns of the other Christian traditions. But the conciliar discussion reveals at the same time the presence of widespread fears that a reception of elements of the Reformation may involve a loss of the Catholic identity.

Among the many themes that allow to grasp this complex intertwining between a positive reception of emphasis and concerns of the Reformation, and the fears of compromising Catholic identity – which defined itself for centuries in opposition to the Reformation – I would like to offer some remarks on the idea of Revelation and on the understanding of Church reform proposed by the Second Vatican Council. The relationship between the Word of God and the Church and the function of the Word of God as the basic norm for Church reform are in fact at the heart of the Reformation in the sixteenth century.

⁶ LG 21. The same pattern is found also in the description of the ministry of presbyters: «Priests, although they do not possess the highest degree of the priesthood, and although they are dependent on the bishops in the exercise of their power, nevertheless they are united with the bishops in sacerdotal dignity. By the power of the sacrament of Orders, in the image of Christ the eternal high Priest, they are consecrated to preach the Gospel and shepherd the faithful and to celebrate divine worship, so that they are true priests of the New Testament. Partakers of the function of Christ the sole Mediator, on their level of ministry, they announce the divine word to all. They exercise their sacred function especially in the Eucharistic worship or the celebration of the Mass by which acting in the person of Christ and proclaiming His Mystery they unite the prayers of the faithful with the sacrifice of their Head and renew and apply in the sacrifice of the Mass until the coming of the Lord the only sacrifice of the New Testament namely that of Christ offering Himself once for all a spotless Victim to the Father. For the sick and the sinners among the faithful, they exercise the ministry of alleviation and reconciliation and they present the needs and the prayers of the faithful to God the Father. Exercising within the limits of their authority the function of Christ as Shepherd and Head, they gather together God’s family as a brotherhood all of one mind, and lead them in the Spirit, through Christ, to God the Father» (LG 28).

The understanding of Revelation

The Constitution *Dei Verbum*, in the perception of many leading figures of Vatican II did not have a great importance from the ecumenical point of view. During the Council, even the Observers paid more attention to the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, to the Decree on Ecumenism and to the Declaration on religious freedom rather than to the Constitution on Divine Revelation. The latter appeared to them as mainly related to an intra catholic debate. However, it can be said with B.-D. Dupuy that “it is precisely on the Constitution *Dei Verbum* that the ecumenical orientation of the Council was at stake at the deepest level. Without the debate on Revelation, most of the conciliar decrees would have an ambiguous meaning, or would not be what they are”⁷.

The ecumenical importance of the issue of the “sources” of the Revelation had instead been clearly understood since the beginning by the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. During the preparatory phase, even before it was formally granted the status of conciliar Commission and therefore the right to present drafts to be discussed in the conciliar aula, the Secretariat had begun to develop reflections on the meaning of the Word of God and on the forms of its transmission in and by the Church.

In August 1961, the Secretariat for promoting Christian Unity had given the task to a group of five theologians – J. Feiner, M. Bévenot, Ch. Boyer, E. Stakemeier, G. Tavard – to prepare a *Votum* on the relationship between Scripture and Tradition⁸. The text, which suggests the point of view of the Secretariat in preparation for the future discussion of the topic at the Council, recalls that the relationship between Tradition and Scripture belongs to the issues which had been highly controversial since the time of the Reformation and that the interest remains high in the current ecumenical debate. But the debate on the issue now appears more promising because “causes of various kinds, especially the growing estimation of the Church and some recent investigations of the history of dogma, have allowed the theological judgments about Tradition and Scripture, which for a long time had appeared almost fixed and immovable, to be subjected to a renewed examination”⁹. As for the Catholic tradition, the text recalls the impulse to reconsider the question of Scripture and Tradition coming from the dogmatic definition of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. In the Protestant tradition, the principle of *sola Scriptura* has been put in a new light by many theologians, who appreciate more the importance of Tradition and Church.

“In Catholic theology, the question is whether the Catholic doctrine that took shape in the anti-Protestant controversy is true and complete in all respects; this research, in addition to Bible studies, got great contributions from the investigations carried out on the theology of the Fathers and of the scholastic theologians of the Middle Ages, as well as on the doctrine of the Council of Trent. Catholic theologians examine again the nature and the task of Tradition as well as its relationship with the Sacred Scriptures, the Church and especially the Church Magisterium. Some aspects of the Catholic truth that somehow had fallen into oblivion, are put back into light and new aspects are highlighted. The Protestants’ wishes are seriously considered, without, however, neglecting those Catholic truths which took more

⁷ B.-D. Dupuy, *La portée de la Constitution Dei Verbum pour le dialogue oecuménique*, in *La Révélation divine. Tome II. Constitution dogmatique «Dei verbum». Texte latin et traduction française par J.-P. Torrell; sous la direction de B.-D. Dupuy*, Cerf, Paris 1968, 557. Cfr. E. Stakemeier, *Die Konzilskonstitution über die göttliche Offenbarung. Werden, Inhalt und theologische Bedeutung*, Bonfacius, Paderborn 1966, 23; L. Vischer, *After the Fourth Session of the Second Vatican Council*, in *The Ecumenical Review* 18(1966), 154-157; A. Maffei, *La parola di Dio e la Chiesa. Il significato ecumenico della costituzione Dei Verbum*, in *Teologia* 31(2006) 173-213.

⁸ *De Traditione et Sacra Scriptura*; some parts of the text are published in U. Betti, *La dottrina del Concilio Vaticano II sulla trasmissione della Rivelazione. Il capitolo II della Costituzione dogmatica Dei verbum*, Pontificio Ateneo Antoniano, Roma 1985, 292-298.

⁹ *De Traditione et Sacra Scriptura* I; U. Betti, 292.

light during the dogmatic evolution. Catholic theologians are trying to avoid the shortcomings and distortions, which can be seen in the history of theology”¹⁰.

In the same document, the Secretariat for Christian Unity also mentions the way it intends its role in the work of the Council.

“The task of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity seems to make sure, as much as possible, that the certain and undoubted points of Catholic teaching on Tradition and Scripture are set out and proposed by the Council so that the separate Christian brothers recognize that teaching as a doctrine of Christian Revelation and so that the discussion of this issue between Catholics and non-Catholic theologians is helped and encouraged and through the same discussion the knowledge and explanation of the truth is more and more developed”¹¹.

To this end the Secretariat for Christian Unity had assembled a group of experts, representatives of the orientations in Catholic theology and exegesis that during the preparatory phase had not been adequately represented in the Doctrinal Commission. So a twofold strategy pursued by the Secretariat during the discussion of the scheme *de fontibus revelationis* takes shape: on one hand its members and experts insist on leaving open the discussion on the issues where there is no agreement within the Catholic theology, on the other hand they ask for an exposition of the essential elements of Catholic doctrine to happen so that it does not create additional obstacles in the dialogue with the other Churches¹².

This requirement is strongly proposed by the president of the Secretariat card. A. Bea at the beginning of the debate on the scheme *de fontibus revelationis* in his speech of 14 November 1962. He reminds first that the text does not correspond to the indications given by Pope John XXIII for the doctrinal exposition to which the Council is called and that the scheme is also weak from the point of view of its pastoral character. So many issues that belong more to the scholastic discussion than to the task of a pastoral body, as it is the Council, are discussed. The President of the Secretariat for Christian Unity also points out that the draft raises many questions from the point of view of ecumenism. “It is not enough – the card. Bea says – to simply propose the Catholic doctrine. We should explain it so that our non-Catholic brothers can understand it and see its foundations. If we speak of the Holy Scripture it is not enough to repeat what has already been said, but it should be considered what regards the difficulties our non-Catholic brothers have today. And in this scheme there is almost nothing about it”¹³.

These critical remarks have certainly helped to shape the orientation of the conciliar assembly, which on November 20 resolved by a majority to suspend the debate on the scheme *de fontibus*; but since those in favour did not reach two-thirds majority, it was decisive the intervention of John XXIII who, on November 21, stated that the scheme had to be withdrawn and that for the further elaboration of the text a mixed commission composed of the members of the theological Commission and the Secretariat for Christian Unity was to be formed.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, 292-293.

¹¹ *Ivi*, 293.

¹² “*Doctrina catholica de Traditione et Scriptura ita debet exponi, a) ut ulterior discussio quaestionum nondum deliquatarum inter theologos catholicos non impediatur, sed potius promoveatur et b) ut dialogus cum theologis acatholicis, qui cognitioni theologicae utriusque partis perutilis esse potest, non difficilior, sed potius facilius reddatur*” (*De Traditione et Sacra Scriptura* III, 1; U. Betti, 294).

¹³ *Acta Synodalia* I/3, 50. In the same discussion the Melchite Patriarch Maximos IV Saigh states: “*Sur le plan oecuménique, on doit regretter que le schéma ne s’efforce pas de préparer les voies à un dialogue ultérieur avec les autres chrétiens, mais au contraire de répéter les formules dépassées de la «Contre-Réforme» et de l’«Anti-Modernisme»*” (*Acta Synodalia* I/3, 54).

We cannot here follow all the steps of the drafting of the Constitution on Divine Revelation; we cannot either enter a detailed examination of the doctrine proposed to investigate to what extent it is able to integrate the emphases of the Reformation. We shall just point out one aspect of this teaching which has great importance both for the Catholic theology and for the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Reformation Churches.

Dei Verbum presents a *historical* and *personal* view of the revelation which has been first spelt out in a text prepared by Jean Danielou in November 1962, while alternative schemes to *de fontibus* were beginning to circulate¹⁴. The text of the French Jesuit offers an understanding of the revelation as disclosure of God's own personal mystery and life and, at the same time, as a manifestation of the call to share the divine nature addressed to all human beings by grace. In this perspective, Jesus Christ is the Savior and the Revealer, the one who gives us a knowledge of salvation which he accomplishes and in which "*tota revelatio continetur*"¹⁵.

The text of Danielou builds the basis for the view of the revelation proposed in the first chapter of *Dei Verbum*. In Christ, God's revelation comes to its fullness because it is realized in a personal way. So the Council is able to overcome the pattern according to which Christ is the teacher of a truth distinct from his person, coming in DV 4 to present Christ as the one who "perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making himself present and manifesting himself: through his words and deeds, his signs and wonders, but especially through his death and glorious resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth. Moreover he confirmed with divine testimony what revelation proclaimed, that God is with us to free us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to life eternal". According to the Constitution *Dei Verbum*, therefore, not only the fullness of revelation is accomplished in a personal way, but the revealed truth itself has a personal character, so that it can never be without a connection with the salvation offered to every human being. The God revealed in Christ is the Emmanuel, God with us, at work to save sinners. And human beings are the ones who are "invited" to the communion with God, in a movement towards the Father, through Christ, in the Spirit; they are the ones that God is freeing from sin and death, so that they may be partakers of eternal life.

This understanding of revelation sets the objective condition for the path leading to the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in 1999. The emphasis put on the salvific dimension of the divine revelation make possible to recognize the legitimacy of the theological perspective of the Reformation and of the soteriological concentration that characterizes its interpretation of the Gospel. The doctrine of justification does not intend to express anything but the New Testament message of salvation freely given to all humanity in Christ. And it is in the confession of this truth, disclosed by the Christian revelation that Catholics and Lutherans have been able to find the fundamental agreement. At the same time, a personal conception of revelation opens the space for the possibility to accept different doctrinal forms in which the truth of the historical and personal event of revelation can be formulated and understood.

The reform of the Church

The question of the Church, along with the issue of revelation, has a central place in the reflection of Vatican II, both in terms of the theological definition of its nature, and in relationship to the reform of its structures. Before proposing concrete reforms of the Church, Vatican II made an option that was all but obvious, by agreeing to integrate the idea of reform in its own reflection on the Church. The difficulties in accepting this idea derived from the meaning that the word had taken

¹⁴ *De revelatione et verbo Dei*, in P. Pizzuto, *La teologia della rivelazione di Jean Daniélou. Influsso su Dei Verbum e valore attuale*, Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Roma 2003, 525-528.

¹⁵ *De revelatione et verbo Dei*, n. 2, 527.

since the sixteenth century, in the context of the polemic against the Protestant Reformation. In the Catholic tradition the idea of Church reform had not entirely disappeared from the ecclesiastical language, but when applied to the Church as a whole, it was associated with an historical process whose outcome had been the loss of the unity of the Western Christianity and the rise of confessional Churches, which, according to Catholic theology, were lacking basic elements of the true Church.

Along with this hesitation related to a painful historical memory, there was also a theological problem: if the Church is of divine institution, great caution is needed in conceiving and implementing reform projects that might affect what is essential in the Church because it has been established by God. This hesitation was relevant because of the inheritance of post-Tridentine apologetics which had focused much of its efforts in demonstrating that all the fundamental institutions of the Church have their roots in the divine will and in the historical institution by Christ, with the consequence that they cannot be subject to any human intervention of reform.

But beyond the form in which this conviction has found expression in Catholic apologetics of the modern age, it is an essential element of the Christian understanding of the Church. The Church, which bears witness to the truth of the Word of God and which is the place where the grace of God sanctifies the believers, enjoys an indefectibility that derives from God's action; therefore there are some areas where the Church cannot be subject to human interventions aiming at change or correction.

On the other hand, the Church is also a historical reality, which never corresponds perfectly to the eschatological gift granted by God to his people. For this reason, Church reform is not only possible but necessary and arises from the need for greater faithfulness to her vocation. In this perspective, Vatican II may be considered as a whole as an effort to renew the doctrine on the Church and the Church institutions, so that the Church may better correspond to the mission that has been entrusted to her.

If the entire Vatican II is characterized by this intention of renewal, in some texts of the Council, the reflection on the renewal and on the reform of the Church becomes more explicit. In the Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, at the end of the first chapter on the mystery of the Church, it is pointed out that, unlike Christ who knew no sin, "the Church, embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and renewal" (LG 8). But it is in the Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio* that the subject is treated more widely. And this is not by chance. This emphasis suggests that the experience of division among the Christians and between the Churches shows the tension between the historical form of the Church and the eschatological gift of reconciliation given by Christ to humanity, which the Church is called to proclaim and make visible in history.

Having mentioned in UR 4 the need "that the Church may daily be more purified and renewed", in numbers 6-7, Church reform and personal conversion are proposed as essential elements of the ecumenical commitment.

"Every renewal of the Church is essentially grounded in an increase of fidelity to her own calling. Undoubtedly this is the basis of the movement toward unity. Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth. The Church is always in need of this, in so far as she is a human institution here on earth. Thus if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in Church discipline, or even in the way that Church teaching has been formulated – to be carefully distinguished

from the deposit of faith itself – these can and should be set right at the opportune moment. Church renewal has therefore notable ecumenical importance” (UR 6).

In the second chapter of the Decree on Ecumenism, after pointing out that “the attainment of union is the concern of the whole Church, faithful and shepherds alike” and that “this concern extends to everyone, according to his talent” (UR 5), the renewal of the Church, called in the quoted passage *renovatio* and *reformatio*, is ranked first in the program for the ecumenical “exercise” of the Catholic Church. Seeking to serve the cause of Christian unity, Catholics must not think about the other Churches at first, but about themselves and what needs to be changed in order that the Catholic Church can be more and more faithful to its own calling. In this way, the Catholic Church also contributes to the rapprochement between the Churches.

The acknowledgement that the Church needs permanent reform (*ecclesia semper reformanda*) is based on the belief that the Catholic church, in the concrete historical form it takes, does not always reflect the image of the Church of Christ adequately and thus prevents non-Catholics from recognizing it as the place where the church of Christ “subsists”. The text also indicates the areas in which this reform and the renewal of the church must be accomplished:

1. in the field of moral conduct such as the choices and behaviours of individual Christians and communities;
2. in ecclesiastical discipline, that is the form taken by the concrete life of the Church and, in a broader sense, the form of its institutions, which are always historically conditioned;
3. in the way of expressing the doctrine, which must be distinguished from the deposit of faith.

The drafting process of this section of the Decree on Ecumenism shows how the hints to the theme of the renewal and the reform of the Church in the early schemes prepared for the conciliar assembly were quite hesitating and cautious, and how difficult it was to explicitly mention the theme in the Decree on Ecumenism¹⁶. The reason for this hesitation was the fear of opening the way for changes that could undermine the essential form of the Church. Among the reasons that have contributed to throw discredit on the very idea of reform and renewal within the Catholic Church we must also mention the Modernist crisis in the early twentieth century. The condemnation of Modernism has spread a prejudicial suspicion towards every “adaptation” to the culture of the time because of the risk of compromising the substance of the Christian faith. It has been possible to go out from this impasse only through the development of a more appropriate concept of Tradition, seen not as a mere repetition and preservation of what the past hands over to the Church of today, but as a synthesis of faithfulness to the past and to the present.

In this area, both for the proposal of a fresh understanding of Tradition, and for the regaining of the idea of reform within the Catholic theology and Church, we have to mention the contribution of Yves Congar. His work *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église*¹⁷, published in 1950, in the period before the Council, is the most elaborate attempt made by a Catholic theologian to reflect on the theme of Church reform. After claiming the legitimacy of the reform of the Church, which also implies the possibility of criticism of the present state of Church life, Congar tries to define the conditions for a “reform without schism” (these conditions are: the primacy of mutual love and pastoral concern, the will of keeping the communion with the whole Church, patience and a renewal that may be fulfilled through the retrieval of the Tradition attested by the sources and not through a

¹⁶ Cfr. G. Cereti, *Riforma della chiesa e unità dei cristiani nell'insegnamento del Concilio Vaticano II*, Il Segno, Verona 1985.

¹⁷ Cerf, Paris 1950.

mechanical adaptation to the present) and then discusses the questions that the Protestant version of Church reform raises for the Catholic Church. In this way, Congar outlines the program of a “reform according to the principle of Tradition”, which in fact has been received and widely applied by Vatican II.

The importance of the idea of Church reform should not however make us forget its limits. The key problem consists in its “formal” character: it says that the Church can and must change in order to correct her deformities and to correspond better and better to the will of her Lord, but as such it is unable to tell us exactly what must change and in what direction the need of faithfulness directs its path.

In fact, there is no reform plan that is not inspired, consciously or unconsciously, by a vision of the Church and of what she is called to be. Also the impulse to Church renewal coming from Vatican II is closely connected with an image of the Church, outlined by the Council through a new listening to the biblical witness and the ecclesial Tradition. The reform therefore does not happen by an act of breaking with the past, but aims at living in greater fullness what the Tradition – in its apostolic origin and through the authoritative witnesses of the following centuries – testifies about the nature and calling of the Church.

This “traditional” orientation of the search for a renewal of Church life is clearly confirmed by the importance attached by Vatican II to the pattern of the ancient Church. On the other hand, the reflection on the Church cannot ignore the typically “modern” problem raised by the Protestant Reformation. The existence of the Protestant Churches that have taken shape through the Reformation and embody a definite understanding of Church reform, in fact, poses many questions to the Catholic Church.

The answer given by Vatican II to these questions has incorporated many elements on which the Reformers of the sixteenth century had drawn attention: the central role of the Scriptures, the liturgy in the language of the people, a pastoral ministry dedicated to preaching, the recognition of the equal dignity of all believers. On the other hand, it is also reaffirmed the validity of customary Catholic teaching about the Tradition as the context in which the Scriptures must be interpreted, the meaning of the sacraments, the hierarchical structure of the Church and the authority of pastors.

We cannot analyze in detail the various aspects of this differentiated reception of the key issues raised by the Protestant Reformation. Let us only mention the understanding of the relationship between the people of God and Church ministry, one of the issues on which the controversy with the Reformers had been more heated. The disagreement had found one of its most visible points of crystallization in the dispute over the meaning of priesthood. Luther had used the concept of priesthood to describe the condition of all the believers who, in baptism, become sharers in the dignity that Christ gives them. In Luther’s theology the doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers, on the one hand, reflects a polemical intent, directed against the attribution to ordained ministers of the Church of a spiritual dignity greater than the one of ordinary believers, in the name of the equality of all members of the People of God; on the other hand, the doctrine of universal priesthood spells out a definition of Christian identity in a Christological perspective, as sharing in the priesthood of Christ and union with Christ through faith.

Faced with these theses, the Council of Trent had condemned those who claim that all Christians, without distinction, would be priests of the New Testament and would all enjoy the same spiritual power¹⁸. In spite of this judgment, Vatican II was able to recognize the legitimacy of the language

¹⁸ Cfr. DH 1767.

of priesthood to characterize the condition of the people of God. The category of the priesthood of the people of God is therefore used in the second chapter of *Lumen Gentium* to describe the identity common to all the members of God's people¹⁹. At the same time, Vatican II keeps using the concept of priesthood in reference to ordained ministers (presbyters and bishops). This means that it is no longer possible to make a univocal use of the concept, but Catholic theology should explain how the common priesthood of the believers and the ministerial priesthood derive from the priesthood of Christ and what relationship exists between the two ways to participate in it. To this last question *Lumen Gentium* answers by saying that both are closely related, although they "differ from one another in essence and not only in degree" (LG 10). The formula is not entirely exempt from possible misunderstandings, as the ecumenical dialogue has often pointed out. Its intention however seems to assert that the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood belong to two different orders, which cannot simply be added to each other. Common priesthood and the priesthood of Church ministers are therefore two ways to participate in the one priesthood of Christ: the first one is the root of the dignity and vocation of all baptized in the people of God, the second one has ministerial character and enables people to perform an essential service for the building up of the Church.

The statements on the priesthood of the believers reveal a general perspective in the view of the Church. That perspective can be seen in the structure of the Constitution on the Church, which places the chapter on the People of God (II) before the chapters on hierarchy and lay people (III-IV). The starting point is therefore not the distinction between teaching and learning Church, between those who sanctify and those who are sanctified, between rulers and ruled, between those who are active and those who are passive, but it is the Christian identity, which is common to all members of the People of God, founded on baptism. This does not mean denying that among the believers there are some differences with regard to vocations and ministries. However, these differences are about how to serve the edification of the Church or the ways to answer the call to holiness, they are not differences that affect the common Christian identity. For this reason, *Lumen Gentium* can state: "If therefore in the Church everyone does not proceed by the same path, nevertheless all are called to sanctity and have received an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God. And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ" (LG 32).

¹⁹ Cfr. LG 10-12.