

Homily for the Mass closing the Vatican II reflections:

The 11th of this month marked the 50th Anniversary of the start of the Second Vatican Council. Our Institute used the opportunity to reflect on the momentous event of the Council. Our annual morning of reflection 1st October featured speakers from outside of the Institute as well as our own staff members. There was also a public lecture and then a panel debate at the Dominican Conference Centre. Today we close our month of reflections with this Mass. The organisers of the month of reflections refer to this as the **Thanksgiving Mass for the gift of Vatican II**.

Associated with the opening of the second Vatican Council are sayings attributed to Bl. John XXIII – sayings such as *a new Pentecost* and *the opening of the windows of the Church*. I like the second of these sayings because it challenges us to think about our thinking. The window metaphor is important because it forces us to face the limitations of one-dimensional thinking. [The familiar preacher’s parable of blind persons coming across an elephant is useful here]. If I have only one window on the world and then bend the world to fit into that window I will end up with distortions. Because of the very nature of reality we need to open several windows and see reality from several vantage points. It is only then that we will have a fuller understanding of reality. The window metaphor puts an end to exclusiveness. This was the genius of John XXIII’s thinking because the Church was now in a new world. As Benedict VI remarked earlier this month on the eve of the Council’s 50th anniversary when he launched the year of faith, *whereas other Church Councils were instituted to rectify errors this was not the case with Vatican II as there were no particular errors to condemn and no aspects of doctrine to be clarified*. The guideline given by John XXIII was that the faith had to speak with a renewed and a more incisive voice because the world was changing so rapidly. Vatican II was intended to be a reflection on the faith and this reflection according to John XXIII was to be the starting point for a new relationship between the Church and the modern age.

This notion of *faith* being the starting point for our dialogue with the world is most relevant fifty years after Vatican II was inducted. The modern world is a secularized world. In our time Theology as a science is being squeezed out of University curricula or at the very least is being put together with the humanities. Now all this looks rather harmless as there is absolutely nothing wrong with theology finding dialogue partners with the secular sciences – in fact this fits in nicely with the vision of John XXIII. But the problem starts when Theology loses its

moral force and is neutralized to such an extent that it's very substance i.e. reflections on the God question, gets lost in some amorphous cluster of secular enquiry. When Theology loses such a core element then it cannot contribute to the world or, worse still, its contribution becomes false. This is bad simply because Theology could end up believing that it has done its job and an insidious lie begins to foment. Just as the Church opens its windows to the world the Christian can also expect, and in fact should demand, that the world opens its windows on the Church – in other words opens its windows to listen to the voice of faith and to make space for that voice in its public squares. After all we seek a dialogue with the world. We do not want to dominate the world neither do we want to be dictated to by the world. We want to dialogue with the world in a mature way in which two freedoms come together – the freedom of faith to announce itself and the freedom of the world to accept or to refuse the contribution of faith. But what is non-negotiable is that we become dialogue partners. This is what we need to strive for. This is why it is so important for faith based institutions such as SJTI to engage rigorously in research. Research is not an optional extra in an academic institution – it is part and parcel of the life of an academic institute. Benedict VI has asked for tertiary level Theological Institutions in every region so that the voice of faith could enter in a meaningful way into the public squares and debating halls of the world. For this reason the forthcoming conference on AIDS is most welcome. Welcome too are the efforts to get our periodical accredited as a peer reviewed journal. These are necessary steps if we have to live out the spirit of Vatican II more fully.

In terms of spirituality Vatican II has much to offer us. The greater participation in the liturgy advocated by the Council is most encouraging. Very often in our part of the world the name of Denis Hurley is most frequently associated with Vatican II. While not in any way diminishing Archbishop Hurley's deep association with the council I want to hold before you the example of someone else who also attended some of the Council's sessions. A very inspiring man when it comes to embracing the spirituality of Vatican II is retired bishop Daniel Verstraete OMI. He is currently living at Hartebeestpoort and even at the age of ninety plus is full of life and has an outlook on life that is so free, so human and so expressive of the mystery of the incarnation. He preached the retreat when the group I was in was preparing for ordination to the diaconate in 1990. The retreat was on the vision of Vatican II. It was inspiring to say the least. Almost every page of his

Penguin edition of the Council's documents was underlined and was crowded with thumb notes. He could not see any other reality being more important for men who were about to be ordained. I went back to the Bishop for eight day directed retreats for four years since 2005 – and each time was helped by him to embrace the gift of humanity. His retreats were up to date, his applications courageous and he showed the greatest sense of freedom as a child of God. This for him was the true intention of the second Vatican Council. Being ministered to by him was a particular privilege. On Thursday last week Fr Quinbert gave us the example of the priest who amazed some bishops with his reflections during a retreat and when they asked him where he got such excellent material he replied that he got the material from the documents of Vatican II. Bishop Verstraete is of that ilk and there is absolutely no reason why we should not be.

The second Vatican Council was all about change – change in our thinking, change in our worship and our rituals, change in our attitudes to others but first and foremost a change in our very selves. On 1st October Mervyn Abrahams examined the Council under the rubric of *text and event*. Now there have been many laudable effects of the Council in the Church in the last 50 years but there have also been a disturbing number of non-events in which changes that could have been effected have not been attempted, and in some cases even resisted. When it comes to the highest teaching office in the Church, resistance to change amounts to disobedience because we are not being attentive to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches. Now we might look at our life and practice and see that we have made some changes but to what extent have the teachings of the Council transformed our lives and made us conform to the image of Christ? The authors of the phenomenon of *change* speak of two types of change – first order change and second order change. The former is superficial e.g. attending lectures to avoid trouble. Second order change on the other hand is deep seated change e.g. attending lectures because I have a thirst for knowledge. In the language of faith this second order change is called conversion. This can cause upsets because it can often mean the reordering of our value systems.

Thus far we have spoken about the need to reflect on the faith and to take our reflections into the public arena; we have spoken a little bit about spirituality and the need for change. In our particular circumstances this homily will not be complete if we do not address a great need for those in formation to take seriously their own

responsibility in the formation enterprise. In this regard Vatican II gave us a document called *Optatum Totsius*. This is the Council's decree on the training of priests and it is important here at St Joseph's because most of our students are scholastics or seminarians in training for priestly ministry. *Optatum Totsius* dismisses some of the soap opera notions of priesthood that have come into the formation arena and calls for those in formation to be **animated by the Spirit of Christ**. It places certain requirements on the candidates themselves in such a way as to foster in them a sense of responsibility by the very fact of their giving themselves for priestly training. This document is essential reading for all those associated with the training of priests starting with the candidates themselves. In a word, the document makes it clear that candidates for the priesthood are not passive recipients of the formation process; they are active collaborators as they enter into dialogue with the God who calls. It is to bring the God question into their daily lives, their daily formation and their daily choices.

A useful image when looking at the reality of priesthood is that of Janus. Janus is a figure from Roman mythology. The strange thing about the god Janus is that he had two faces – one facing the past and the other facing the future. That is why the month of January is where it is in the Roman calendar. One face looks at the past and the other looks towards the future. The priesthood is the Janus of the theological enterprises. It has two faces – one turned towards God on behalf of the people and the other turned towards the people on behalf of God. To the extent that we face the people on God's behalf we are always holy. We are holy because through authentic ministry God makes us holy. But to the extent that we face God on behalf of the people, we are always broken, sinful and needy. I must never forget that the brokenness of those I represent before God includes and mirrors my own brokenness and my own compromises. Recently at Cleland Fr John Patterson, Fr Mbheki Ngcobo and I were reflecting on something when Fr Patterson decided to quote from Rolheiser's book *Holy Longings*. The book considers various spiritualities and under what he calls *A Spirituality of Ecclesiology* Rolheiser paraphrases from Carlo Carretto's book *I sought and I found*. Both books are in our library and I chose to quote from the original. It is for me a fitting way to end our reflections on Vatican II because this is the Church made up of you and me. Carretto considers the Church with all its graces and beauties and also all its scandals. Looking at the Church for him was like looking into a mirror. This is what he says:

How much I must criticize you, my Church and yet how much I love you!

How you have made me suffer and yet how much I owe you.

I should like to see you destroyed and yet I need your presence.

You have given me so much scandal and yet you have made me understand holiness.

Never in the world have I seen anything more obscurantist, more compromised, more false, yet never have I touched anything more pure, more generous or more beautiful.

How often I have felt like slamming the door of my soul in your face - and how often I have prayed that I might die in your sure arms!

No, I cannot be free of you, for I am one with you, even though not completely you.

Then, too – where should I go?

To build another?

But I cannot build another without the same defects, for they are my own defects (which) I bear within me.

And again, if I build one, it will be my Church, and no longer Christ's.

And so as we conclude our reflection marking the 50th anniversary of the start of Vatican II let our prayer be: *Lord, bless your Church with sound research and a genuine thirst for the truth; with faithful membership; and with holy priests and ministers.* Dear members of the Theological Institute, the beauty of this prayer is that we can make it happen and in so doing we can keep the dream alive. Amen.