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## Life in the Spirit of Second Vatican Council

**Isaac Padinjarekuttu**

*Professor of Church History and Dean at Oriens  
Theological College, Shillong, Meghalaya*

**Abstract:** In the person of Kurien Kunnumpuram, we see someone celebrated for his theological contributions, spiritual insights and commitment to Christian humanism. And the thread that runs through his entire life as a theologian, spiritual guide, scholar and teacher is his unwavering commitment to a Church that embodies the spirit of Vatican II. And for Kurien, what symbolized the Vatican II Spirit is freedom because it belongs to the very nature of the human person as we see in the deceptively simple sentence, all but lost in the documents of Vatican II: “Authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within the human person.” It is this commitment to freedom that has made his reflections on the Church and life in the Church refreshingly new, relevant and appealing to all. Kurien’s motto has been, “Reach out to life with both hands” as seen on a picture hanging on the wall in front of him. And there can be no genuine life without genuine freedom. Kurien always fought

against an un-free Church and theology, an un-free religion and spirituality, and, therefore, this short paper is a plea to revive the spirit of the Second Vatican Council in the Church in general and in theology in particular.

Vatican II was a revolution and revolutions can be stalled for a time, but cannot be stopped. Therefore, it may be wiser to conclude that the vast movement of transformation begun by Vatican II will not be easily ended either externally or internally. Hopefully, the Church will genuinely accept the spirit and implications of Vatican II in realizing a “people of God” ecclesiology, in a stress upon both a working collegiality and the genuine centrality of the Eucharist within the Church, especially the local Church in the warm recognition of the values of pluralism and freedom within and between particular Churches as within human society generally and in a commitment to work and find Christian holiness within the struggle for justice and peace in solidarity with the poor. But for that to happen, the Church has to become humble.

Keywords: Vatican II, freedom, Christian humanism, Church open to the world.

On the Sunday after the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968) of Pope Paul VI was published, the American Jesuit, Horace McKenna, preaching to an impoverished congregation at St. Aloysius parish in Washington D.C. apparently left the impression that despite the encyclical there was still room for the exercise of individual conscience. After the Mass, a lawyer came up to him and asked: “Do you think you can reconcile what you said with loyalty to the Holy Father?” “Yes, I think, I can,” replied the priest. The lawyer retorted: “I don’t see how you can say that. Let me make up an example. If you were working for the President of the United States, and he gave you a bag of rose seeds, and told you to plant them in the Rose Garden of the White House, and you didn’t do it, would you say you were being loyal?” “I think so,” said the Jesuit, “if the Rose Garden was already full.”

In the person of Kurien Kunnumpuram, a Jesuit of a similar mould is being honoured and celebrated for his theological contributions, spiritual insights and commitment to Christian humanism. And the thread that runs through his entire life as a theologian, spiritual guide, scholar and teacher is his unwavering commitment to a Church that embodies the spirit of Vatican II. And for Kurien, what symbolized the Vatican II Spirit is freedom because it belongs to the very nature of the human person as we see in the deceptively simple sentence, all but lost in the documents of Vatican II: “Authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within the human person.” It is this commitment to freedom that has made his reflections on the Church and life in the Church refreshingly new, relevant and appealing to all. Kurien’s motto has been, “Reach out to life with both hands” as seen on a picture hanging on the wall in front of him. And there can be no genuine life without genuine freedom. Kurien always fought against an un-free Church and theology, an un-free religion and spirituality, and, therefore, this short paper is a plea to revive the spirit of the Second Vatican Council in the Church in general and theology in particular.

## **The Story of Catholic Theology**

Before the twelfth century, theology was an exposition of Scripture by appeal to the established tradition of ecclesiastical authorities. So Augustine said to the Manichaeans: “I would not believe in the gospel if the authority of the Catholic Church did not lead me to do so.” A theologian had authority not on the ground of his own interpretations but only if his insights were consistent with those of his predecessors and the received doctrinal tradition. Even the best theological synthesis of the Middle Ages was basically reconciling it with the past voices. By the modern period, this authority was to be found in the Roman Pontiff, who is considered the most authentic interpreter of Revelation in Scripture and Tradition. The Reformers also basically shared the idea that truth was not to be found in the individual or collective acts of theologising but in the fidelity to divine Rev-

elation. The only difference was that for them it was only Scripture, but for the Catholics, it also included Tradition. But they the Reformers also introduced another element into theology, the freedom of the theologian to study, to criticise and thus the responsibility of the theologian to delve into the truth through his creativity. It is the Enlightenment that took this idea of freedom and autonomy further and effected a paradigm shift and even rejected the truth claims of both Scripture and Tradition, placing them in opposition to human reason. The Christian Churches had to defend the integrity of their theological vision against this subjective approach.

What came to the rescue of theology was Romanticism. Truth, the Romantics claimed, was discoverable not in some objective metaphysical referent but only in its historical development. Divine Revelation is not static but rather can be conceived as a process and hence, experience plays an important role and so the “role of individual creativity in theological reflection was remarkably enhanced. The theologian was no longer seen as mimetically representing an objective revelation but as imaginatively constructing the immediate, though historical, experience of salvation.” Here begins the tension between the Magisterium and the theologian in the nineteenth and twentieth century. This paradigm found itself in conflict with the classical paradigm “as defined at Trent, affirmed at Vatican I, and promulgated throughout the Modernist controversy and its aftermath until Vatican II.” The most forceful repudiation of it came in the wake of the Modernist controversy by Pope Pius X in his *Pascendi dominici gregis* of 1907. The Pope assailed the Modernist pride which “leads them to hold themselves up as the rule for all.” No doubt, a number of positions of Modernism were a threat to Catholic Christianity. On the other hand, the condemnation showed no appreciation of the positive values the movement represented: faith as personal encounter, relation between psychology and religion, sense of mystery, pastoral function of theology, less mechanical role for authority, new insights into development of dogma, fresh stress on the organic nature of the Church and the importance

of the laity, greater respect for scriptural scholarship and natural science, a newer framework for church-state relationships, a call to abandon a Catholic cultural ghetto, etc. More harmful was the aftermath of the condemnation which created an intellectually oppressive situation in the Church which lasted practically till the eve of Vatican II.

## **The Challenge of Vatican II**

Vatican II had to recognize a new man, a new woman and a new world that had emerged after the post-World War II period. A new epoch had come to birth. A new epoch is born when there is a consensus about ideals and standards, consensus about what is meaningful at all, about what is obvious and simply beyond argument, a consensus about what counts as relevant, worthwhile and significant, or pointless or ridiculous. The period surrounding Vatican II was a new epoch although the Church seemed unaware of its existence. This was as an epoch in which traditional religion and theology were becoming rather irrelevant. The God they presented could not be experienced by anyone. In an age increasingly concerned with man's temporal destiny and temporal development, an age that has discovered the person and is passionately concerned with emphatically personal realms of responsibility, identity and liberty, traditional methods of philosophy and theology with their concern for objectivity, known and judged according to universal norms supplied by the Church was not acceptable. Contemporary man and woman searching desperately for meaning were not attracted to such a philosophy and theology. The world had shifted from the classical mentality where truth floats serenely in a pace unaffected by persons and events, to historical consciousness where truth is ever writhing in the "joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age." Search for certainty is less significant than the quest for intelligibility. There is also a profound affirmation of freedom. Human being cannot be understood apart from his freedom. The Second Vatican Council understood some of these modern aspirations and we see traces of them, for example, in the affirmation

of religious freedom as a human right, based on the very dignity of the human person. Philosophy would characterize this radical shift as one from essence to existence, which for the Church would mean that living in the doctrine of Christianity is more important than speculating on it. There is a dynamic interrelation of the self and the world, the awareness that experience of the world of things was not as important as the experience of the world of persons, that experience is never a closed circle but always open to further development.

Within Catholicism and outside, the traditional search for certainty has been replaced by the quest for understanding. Understanding how God speaks to men and women today, disclosing himself to men and women today, in persons and events and situations rather than through propositions and abstract truths. And one is not sure just where secular experience ends and religious experience begins. There is “less attachment to the incontrovertible proposition, more profound attachment to the God to whom all propositions point; less clarity in the meaning of experience, the greater conviction that religious experience cannot be “cribbed, and confined” by law or system.

It is good to point out that many of these ideas were already present in the “words of the holy fathers” spoken centuries ago. In that sense, the Council was basically going back to the “sources” in trying to answer the new questions of the modern world. One of the important facets of patristic thought was that there was no gap between theology and spirituality. “If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian,” said, Evagrius Ponticus. The gap was created later when it was made it into a system, a set of ideas. For the Fathers, theology was a search, not only for the truth of God, but for God’s very self.

Moreover, the search was carried on not by reason alone, but the whole person because it is the whole person that must respond to the revealing God. So patristic theology is a spirituality. It was produced not in theological laboratories but grew out of

live problems in the Church and society, pain, persecutions and sufferings; it was not timeless, extra-temporal and static. A second important facet of patristic theology was the Fathers' experience of Scripture. True, they did not have the tools that we have, and they were accused of too much subjectivism and allegory, but they did not commit the sin of "straining out the gnats and swallowing the camel" through lifeless exegesis. They were able to see God and his works in Scripture. "It is this feeling of faith that we must recapture if we too want to understand what the Bible is trying to tell us. Then it will be that many of the false problems will vanish. We shall find in the Bible the truth in its totality because we shall be searching for it there alone where God put it." Theology for the Fathers was their experience of Scripture within the Church. We need to recapture their familiarity with Scripture, their love for Scripture, their search for Christ in Scripture, which prompted Jerome to say that ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ. The third facet of patristic theology was its understanding of the Church. For the Fathers, the Church is primarily a communion, not a pyramid but a body. This one communion shares jointly in Christ's light and life. This one communion jointly communicates Christ's truth and grace to men and women. This experience of the Church as communion was not so much a thought-out theory as a lived-out reality. It was expressed warmly in the patristic imagery of the Church as "mother" with all the faithful responsible for the common life of the community. There were heresies, sects, schisms, etc. but the Christian Church during the patristic era could suffer these without devastating rupture to its oneness. There were different theological currents, schools and tendencies, but all coexisted within the one Church. There were geographical and cultural mentalities but not to the destruction of the one body. Despite divergences in race and culture, in language and mentality, in exegesis and theology, Basil of Caesarea could write: "The faith we profess is not one thing in Seleucia, another in Constantinople, another in Zela, another in Lampsacus, and still another at Rome. The faith that circulates today is no different from the faith of yesterday; it is always one and the same." This oneness was not an abstract unity

parroted by bishops in council, it was a life, and its foci were the local church and the Eucharist. This communion was imperilled in an established Church torn internally where Christian emperors like Constantine could control ecclesiastical policy and bishops like Cyril of Alexandria could call a fellow-bishop “the new Judas” and Rome and Constantinople could challenge each other with unchristian coldness. But still in the patristic age the magic word was not authority but community. And the Eucharist was still capable of linking hostile hands in love, still the most powerful force for building up the Body of Christ. That is the reason why Henri de Lubac clearly perceived that there could not be any renewal of the Church without the study of the Fathers.

Thus, at Vatican II, the council Fathers came back to the thesis that theology has to be authentically biblical and historical because it has to wrestle with the biblical event and the progressive efforts of the Christian ages to grasp it and express it and live it. Theology has to be anthropological in that it has to search out human beings as they are; it has to be pastoral in that its burning questions will rise in significant measure from the anguish of contemporary man and woman. It will be ecumenical in that other Christians will not be primarily adversaries but co-operators in common concern, the effort of faith not simply to understand but to unite in love. It will be eschatological in its awareness of a pilgrim people in the movement now and tomorrow and every day, thorough the demonic and salvific, to the consummation of their corporate oneness in Christ. Vatican II’s contribution to theology was not primarily in its formal acceptance of a particular approach, for example, to ecclesiology or to revelation; although its documents on these matters are immensely significant, the Council’s importance for theology lies rather in the new location it proposed for theological reflection. It proposed that the Church ought to be characterized by a profound engagement with the reality of the world’s experience: no longer a Church set apart from the world within an institutional Christendom, but a Church that enters into profound solidarity with the experience of human society, and takes humanity seriously in the unfolding of its history.



This new location of the Church's identity prescribes a new location for theological activity. Human history becomes the *locus theologicus* for the post-conciliar theologian. The new stage on which post-conciliar theology is to speak is set unambiguously in the middle of human history and experience. Christian theology in every age must address the question of how Jesus is significant for a culture.

## **The Situation after Vatican II**

Avery Dulles clearly perceived that in consequence Catholic theology moved "into a period radically unlike the past few centuries, necessitating an abrupt shift of theological style comparable in magnitude to the shift that occurred with the dissemination of printed literature in the sixteenth century." The process was not without problems because uncritical reception of modern trends in natural science, philosophy, sociology etc. by theology can mask the fact that "Catholic theology is always a reflection on the faith of the Church, practised within the community of faith, with a view to serving and enhancing the spiritual life of that community." But still, within this framework, the post-conciliar Church has thrown out remarkably powerful movements within theology which have proved the words of Karl Rahner right, that Vatican II signalled the emergence of a "world Church" from an initially Judaeo-Christian, and subsequently European, cultural matrix. Latin American Liberation Theology, which had tremendous impact on Asia as well, Asian Theologies in dialogue with the religions of Asia, Feminist Theology, Dalit Theology from India, Tribal Theologies from various parts of the world, African Theology, etc. are examples of the post-conciliar insight into the priority of the landscape of lived experience in the articulation of theological doctrine. The priority has been in establishing local theologies appropriate to the lived experience of the community. Theology since the Council has been rooted in the Church's experience of asking difficult questions about what it means to be the Church of Christ in the contemporary world; It has to find ways of understanding itself as a living, varied, changing com-

munity whose identity is established, not prior to, but as a function of, its relationship to the world in which God's Kingdom grows. This has led to a preference, on the part of theology, for inductive approaches, in which the context in which theology is conducted becomes a constitutive feature of theological reflection. If at the heart of human history is the mystery of Christ, and if at the heart of contemporary history is poverty, violence, oppression and injustice on a massive scale, then theology is led to see the contemporary form of its task as a reversal of the *maxi ubi ecclesia, ibi, Christus* (Where the Church is, there is Christ). It becomes instead, *ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia* (Where Christ is, there is the Church), and is expanded to mean "Where the poor are suffering, there must the Church (and its theology) be." Thus the centre of interest has shifted to creating local theologies appropriate to the lived experience of the community. There are difficulties inherent in this approach as the Church wrestles with the place of pluralism in the Church. Repeated stress upon the benefits brought by diversity and pluralism is a recurrent theme of the Council documents. This returns again and again in a variety of contexts, and the Council has called for ecclesial, liturgical and theological pluralism. It calls for a genuine diversity "even in the theological elaborations of revealed truth" and speaks of "lawful freedom of theological enquiry to which laity and clergy alike have a right." Differing theological formulations, we are assured are "often to be considered as complementary rather than conflicting."

But it has not been easy to practice this value, especially in the decades following the Council. The Vatican had taken action against several theologians, requiring clarification on disputed points, silencing some of them for a period, and prohibiting publication or teaching, declaring that a theologian is not suitable to teach Catholic theology or withdrawing the right to be called a Catholic theologian etc. It signalled a determination, on the part of the Roman authorities to constrain theological development within narrow limits than were generally envisaged in the Council halls. Such actions have the potential of making Vatican II and

its aftermath just another brief aberration within Catholic history comparable to the conciliar movement of the fifteenth century. For the supporters of this view, the reforms of Vatican II could at best be considered administrative rather than theological. For them, in many aspects the Council has already gone too far and reining in the rebellious horses is absolutely necessary for its very survival.

On the other hand, there are others who believe that the pluralist forces within the Church cannot be and should not be tamed by anyone and the reforms envisaged by Vatican II should be taken to their logical conclusion. The pendulum should swing back with a new phase of more radical reforms and only a pluralistic Catholic Christianity will be able to respond without losing its core identity to the needs of a truly world Church and of the ongoing transformation of human consciousness and intellectual understanding. But there is the real danger of a third possibility. As both these groups are trying to vie with each other, the Church will decline. The pull factors of conservatism will sap the vitality of area after area of ecclesial strength, thus preventing the liberals from going any further. Clericalism in the Church, still widespread in most parts of the world, will make impossible the development of alternative models of ministry. The intellectual strength of Catholicism will fade under pressure of a rather fundamentalist theology taught in seminaries. The Church will irreversibly decline as in some parts of the world it is already doing. Manifestly, so vast a body does not collapse overnight, and much of the decline can be masked for decades. It will retain its strength more in some places than in others. It will continue to win some local battles but its overall role as a credible world community of faith and love, a body that can be ignored by no one, a living tradition that combines humanity and the most sophisticated rational understanding with divinity and mystical insight, will simply dwindle away leaving the Church as a narrowing fellowship upon the margins of history.

## Conclusion

It is, of course, impossible for the historian to foresee the future. It is undeniable that the Church was by and large quite slow in assimilating the spirit of Vatican II and implementing its decisions. But Vatican II was a revolution and revolutions can be stalled for a time, but cannot be stopped. Therefore, it may be wiser to conclude that the vast movement of transformation begun by Vatican II will not be easily ended either externally or internally. The Church will hopefully genuinely accept the spirit and implications of Vatican II in realizing a “people of God” ecclesiology, in a stress upon both a working collegiality and the genuine centrality of the Eucharist within the Church, especially the local Church in the warm recognition of the values of pluralism and freedom within and between particular Churches as within human society generally and in a commitment to work and find Christian holiness within the struggle for justice and peace in solidarity with the poor. But for that to happen, the Church has to become humble. Revelation makes no sense without the human being’s answer in faith. This response, that takes place in history as a definite experience, in a concrete language, also belongs to the content of revelation. We are not adding anything to revelation here but are interpreting revelation. Neither part is independently the whole of revelation. So a completely objective content of revelation outside of history is a questionable concept. The whole of revelation and faith exist in history. No zone is immune from the storms of man’s history, no zone of pure theology. But the Spirit who is constantly active in the Church, and whose ‘strength is revealed in weakness’, preserves the identity of the Christian faith intact, and helps it to ‘remain in the truth’ through the vicissitudes of history. Creative faithfulness to the Gospel is possible only in a changing and developing history. Therefore, to suppress the freedom of theology in the name of truth is no service to the truth.

It is a known fact all over the world truth claims are associated with violence, arrogance, intolerance and indoctrination. But

there is truth and it has to be found, and dialogue is the only possible way for it. But this dialogue is only reasoning together and learning together. Claiming that you have got the truth wrapped up breeds violence and intolerance. Believing that together, we may arrive at the truth can heal differences. We are all pilgrims. We do not know all the answers in advance. The Church must be seen as a community of those who teach, but also those who learn. The Church must have the courage to proclaim its convictions but the humility to learn from others. St. Augustine said: “Whoever thinks that in this mortal life one may so disperse with the mists of the imagination as to possess the unclouded light of unchangeable truth understands neither what he seeks nor who he is that seeks it.” The Church has to protect itself from runaway secularism masqueraded as *aggiornamento*, but the Church leaders have also a special responsibility to balance their legitimate concern for vigilance about Catholic identity against the urgency of fostering creative Catholic thinking and activism. Clarity does not have to mean paralysis, and discernment does not have to mean turning a deaf ear to new perspectives because of anxiety about their provenance or possible implications. In other words, even if personalities or movements in the Church sometimes give bishops and other authorities heartburn, that doesn’t mean they have nothing to contribute on any possible subject.

## Notes

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