A PENTECOSTAL LOOKS AGAIN AT VATICAN II

by Donald Dean Smeeton

Many Protestants confess confusion concerning changes in contemporary and charismatic Catholicism. Such feelings are not unique to Protestants. Many Catholics are equally confused! This uncertainty is specifically painful for the traditional Pentecostal because the perplexed Pentecostal cannot understand why "Spirit-filled Catholics" retain so many "unbiblical" views and practices, but the Pentecostal hesitates to reject totally a "renewal" which has been a spiritual boon to so many Catholics. The ever increasing attention--from

1Catholics who are charismatic by experience have generally preferred the term "renewal" and avoided "movement"—a term enshrined by the traditional Pentecostals. To Catholics, the word "movement" implies organization, duties, officers. An especially helpful presentation of the issues of this article can be reviewed in Russell P. Spittler, ed. Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976).

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both within and without the Catholic Church--given to the charismatic demonstrates that although some Pentecostals might wish the dilemma to disappear, it appears to be here to stay.

Amid this perplexing problem, the Pentecostal as well as other evangelicals might gain some comprehension of “the riddle of Roman Catholicism” (to borrow a phrase from Jaroslav Pelikan) by looking again at Vatican II. Fifteen years ago, the press--secular and sacred--was filled with prophetic promises and definite disclaimers concerning the conciliar documents coming from Rome.

During the first half of the 1960’s, the period of Vatican II, the question for most Pentecostals was whether it was possible for a Baptist, Congregationalist, or Disciples of Christ to be truly Pentecostal. Charismatic Catholics were considered a hypothetical contradiction in terms. Now, after a decade and a half, it might be possible to make a calculated and calm assessment of the council’s actions. Like a rock cast into a pool, the effects of Vatican II might best be judged at a distance as the ripples move in ever widening circles.

Some Catholics would like to explain the Second Vatican Council as a mere continuation of the First (December, 1869 to July 18, 1870) which was brought to a premature finish. Vatican II stands however unique in the history of the Roman Church for a number of reasons. First, unlike any of the other twenty-one councils labeled by the Roman Church as “ecumenical,” Vatican II was not called to combat some internal heresy or some external challenge. Pope John XXIII called the council, using his own often repeated expression, to “let some fresh air into the Church.” A second uniqueness is the length of the approved documents. The sixteen final instruments contain 103,014 words in the Latin text making the final literary results more massive than the other twenty councils combined. A third uniqueness, and the most important for this article, is that Vatican II was the first council to approve contradictory dogmas. Appeasing various factions at the council, numerous compromises resulted in documents so carefully worded that opposing elements could approve. Although often deliberately avoiding tridentine doctrinal formulations, the council affirmed many traditional doctrines, yet gave equal approval to new, contradictory positions.

Additionally, and most important for the Pentecostal, the council fathers made constant reference to the Holy Spirit. Even after fifteen years...

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