

How Vatican II renewed South African Catholicism – as perceived by *The Southern Cross* 1962-1968

Anthony Egan

Jesuit Institute South Africa, Johannesburg, South Africa

Abstract

This article is a preliminary attempt to examine the reception of Vatican II, the great reform of the Catholic Church initiated by Pope John XXIII, that occurred between 1962 and 1965, on the Catholic Church in South Africa. As a major primary source, I am using the *Southern Cross* [hereafter SC], the semi-official, but by no means only Catholic newspaper in South Africa. Local Catholic papers existed in some dioceses, as did *UmAfrika*, a Zulu paper produced out of Mariannhill near Durban, but none of them had the “official” status or breadth of circulation of SC. Though not owned by the Bishops Conference (SACBC), the SC’s status is such that it can be seen as almost official, so much so that its first lay editor was only appointed in the 1990s.

My article tries to trace the view of Vatican II the SC presented, drawing on news reports of the Council, commentaries by local and international scholars (notably Josef Ratzinger, Karl Rahner, Hans Kung, etc) published in its pages as well as editorials, letters to the editor and increasingly articles by informed (or at times ill-informed) Catholic laity. Given that the coverage of Vatican II was considerable, amounting to hundreds of pieces of varying lengths and much of them news agency reports (cf. Henriques 1997: 33-39), I shall inevitably be selective, and focus on how South African Catholics’ attitudes changed as the Council happened.

My central thesis is that we can trace a somewhat dramatic shift in the SC’s pages brought about by the Council: from caution and conformity to critical engagement with the theology the Council surfaced, even – with the controversial post-Conciliar *Humanae Vitae* document on artificial birth control – the first rumblings of genuine Catholic dissent on doctrinal and moral issues *outside* the ongoing debate on apartheid in South Africa.

Before the Council

The Catholic Church in South Africa was essentially a combination of a colonial church comprising (increasingly a minority) immigrant Catholics from Ireland, Italy, and later Portugal and a (majority) missionary church to Africans. Until 1806 it was a proscribed institution was unable to function in any way; after the second British occupation of the Cape Colony, and particularly after Catholic Emancipation in Britain in the 1830s, it was allowed to establish itself in what would become contemporary South Africa. It still suffered from widespread anti-Catholic hostility, whether under British or Boer rule until the Union in 1910, and as a result tended to be inward-looking and conservative in its thinking, as well as cautious in public debate (Brown 1960; Abraham 1989; Brain 1991; Brain & Denis 1999).

This was not least because the vast majority of its clergy (priests, bishops, religious brothers and sisters) were foreign-born: particularly after the 1948 electoral victory of the National Party this, together with strong Catholic anti-communism, made the Church very cautious about taking strong political stances against apartheid. In addition, the working class or “new” colonial middle class white constituency of the Church was for the most part quite racist, certainly not significantly less racist than their English-speaking or Afrikaans Reformed counterparts. Though by the 1950s they were the minority within the Church, they also held the purse-strings very tightly. In fairness, one should note a certain deferential attitude by laity towards the hierarchy (bishops and priests) in almost all areas except, at times, apartheid.

Yet one must also note that though the Church was essentially conformist even before the Council, there were rumblings about change. A minority of white Catholics (many of the products of the excellent Catholic school system), and a tiny group of black Catholics, went to university, became professional people and academics (Egan 1991; Egan 1999: 314-348). Though small, and often cautious, these Catholic intellectuals had already started to ask questions not only about the state they lived in, but also the Church in which they worshipped. Within student groups like the National Catholic Federation of Students, some had been taught by Dominican, Jesuit and Franciscan chaplains who were themselves, like the famous Franciscan Diego Connery (d 1955) (Egan 1991:11-12; Collins nd: 42-76), familiar with the *avant garde nouvelle theologie* of Yves Congar, Henri De Lubac and others – dangerous stuff condemned by Rome but shortly to be the foundation of conciliar reform.

Closely aligned with the students were a small group of Catholic academics well-versed in new theology and in the Thomist philosophy of Aquinas (rather than the dominant neo-Thomism of the Church), like the convert from the Dutch Reformed Church Marthinus Versfeld and Denis Hurley, the former seminary rector

turned archbishop of Durban (Kearney 2009:41-92 *et seq*). As a rule, this small core of intellectuals were pressing both for greater political involvement by the Church in South Africa and for reform of Catholicism itself. They were also open to ecumenical dialogue, though for many this was understood as easing tensions between Catholics and Protestants, while trying to bring the churches of the Reformation “back” to Catholicism (Denis 2011).

In these groups flourished the first sign of Catholic reform: the “dialogue Mass”, essentially the Tridentine Rite in Latin but with the congregation (not just the altar servers) saying the responses. Dramatically, too, the president faced the congregation during these Masses. As this became increasingly part of Sunday parish worship, the Church in South Africa was divided: some (like the intellectuals) liked it and wanted to see the next step – parts (or all) of the Mass in the vernacular; others hated it, seeing it as ‘too complicated’ and an intrusion into their private devotion. Letters to the editor in the late 1950s were equally divided over this, with perhaps a handful suggesting the introduction of the vernacular as an alternative.

Very few Catholics in South Africa, I suspect, anticipated Vatican II. Yet by the late 1940s, there were signs that things were changing. In a 1944 Christmas radio message Pius XII acknowledged that “the future belongs to democracy”:

Taught by bitter experience, people today more and more oppose monopolies of power that are dictatorial, accountable to no one, and impossible to reject. They want a system of government more compatible with the dignity and liberty due to citizens (O’Malley 2008:83).

There was no suggestion, however, that what Pius saw as good for citizens was in any way equally good for Catholics. Admittedly, he eased some pressure on his turbulent theologians, but was by no means open to significant reform.

Reform came with the election in 1958 of Giuseppe Roncalli, a stout Italian peasant who had been a historian, a Vatican diplomat, and an opponent of Fascism and Nazism. Well into his eighties, he was seen as a compromise candidate and a stopgap for Giovanni Montini (later Paul VI) who, at the time, was deemed too young to be pope. As a church historian, John understood that the Church had always been changing over time in response to circumstances. As a pastor he also had a positive view of humanity, unlike the embattled pessimism of his predecessors. The siege mentality had failed, he believed. He saw the need for *aggiornamento*, “opening up” of the Church to the modern world. Within a year of becoming pope he called a council of the Church.

The editor of SC, Fr Louis Stubbs, observed in an editorial that John’s decision showed “a depth of vision which must cause those who, on his election, suggested that he was only a stopgap Pope, to admit gladly that they were hasty in their judgment” (SC 4 February 1959:6). More sanguinely than perhaps was justified (not least for those who find the suppression of creative theologians during the so-called “Modernist crisis” mildly obscene!), he noted how the Church had already reformed itself since the Reformation:

So effective was this inward reformation that it has been said that if Luther came back today he would have nothing to rebel against: never has the spiritual and moral prestige of the Catholic Church and the Papacy stood higher (SC 4 February 1959:6).

Though Stubbs was impressed by John’s summoning of Vatican II, one senses in this and his many subsequent editorials that not too much was expected of it – mere tinkering of a well-oiled and (to those within at least) prestigious institution. There were those, of course, who hinted that the Council *might* reform the liturgy slightly: perhaps the institutionalisation of the dialogue Mass and even, at the extreme, the introduction of the vernacular to some parts of it. To be fair to Stubbs and the SC, they were not alone in thinking this. Even the most visionary of South African bishops, Denis Hurley, did not expect too much. When bishops were asked for suggestions for reform by the Central Preparatory Commission (CPC) in Rome (who had to prepare the Council’s documents for the bishops’ approval), Hurley did not respond to it immediately. On a second request he made a list of suggestions, sent them off to Rome, and then suddenly found himself seconded to the Commission (Hurley 2005:7-17).

The Council period

The first session – and afterwards

While in Rome, the CPC prepared the Council Documents for Vatican II (which the Bishops would later reject in toto), Catholics in South Africa prepared themselves for something quite uncertain. Between 1959 and the opening of the Council three years later, many writers and correspondents would speculate on what changes to

expect. The fiercest debates in the SC revolved around the Liturgy – whether Latin was appropriate for celebrating the Eucharist. Once again, Stubbs editorialised, trying to strike a balance:

There is much beauty in the sonorous music of Latin; but does no other language have its own beauty to replace this? If you have not yet prayed for the success of the Second Vatican Council, here at least is a subject which may bring you to your knees (SC 7 February 1962).

For the SA Catholic intellectuals, there were other issues they hoped would be addressed by Vatican II. Within the student movement, which was by then among the most politically liberal sectors of the Church (in close alignment with the National Union of South African Students), discussions ranged over both the meaning of the Council and what its impact might be. At a series of talks in Pretoria, seminary professor Fergus Barrett OFM highlighted that it “had supreme power in the Church” with and under the leadership of the Pope. It was both an expression of and call for unity, said lay speaker Raymond Langley:

[I]f there is to be unity, it must be unity according to the mind of Christ. It must not be a ‘sham’ unity – the kind of unity that covers up vital cleavages by calling them ‘tensions’. It must not be a unity achieved by sacrificing essential elements in the Church – elements which have been established by Divine Revelation (SC 30 May 1962:1).

In Johannesburg, another university chaplain, Peter Paul Feeny OP, spoke on “The Future of Catholicism” with an eye fixed on the forthcoming Council (SC 30 May 1962:10-11). A proper theology of Incarnation, he said, included social, political, economic and moral structures within it. Union or unity, in particular Christian unity, was central to a proper Incarnation – God incarnate in the world. The human vocation (he still called it “Man’s Vocation” then) was to be on a mission “that of clothing Christ afresh in the garments proper to the time now”. Looking towards the Council he said:

Indeed Truth, Unity and Love are the key words of the Council, but what is Unity worth if it is not Unity in Love? What is Love worth unless taught in terms of Truth – God’s truth made mine?

The future of Catholicism, he continued, is both unchanging and ever-changing: “The church is not an organisation with members, but a living Mystery ... not co-extensive with physical Catholic membership” since the Church did not live up to its calling. It needed reform: more bishops, smaller communities, experimentation in liturgy and practice and engagement with the world. This is what the Council needed to do.

Of course this was not what the CPC had in mind. However they, and the Church, were in for a shock, when suddenly the bishops rebelled against the prepared documents. John XXIII set the scene at the opening of the Council on October 11 1962 when he declared:

We feel we must disagree with these prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand ... In the present order of things, Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by men’s [sic] own efforts and even beyond their very expectations, are directed toward the fulfillment of God’s superior and inscrutable designs. And everything, even human differences, leads to the greater good of the Church (Madges & Daly 2003:5).

Encouraged by Good Pope John, the bishops did not approve the prepared documents. They rejected them and demanded that they be revised. Led by German, Belgian, Dutch and Eastern Rite bishops centred on the 80-something year old Melkite Patriarch of Antioch, Maximos IV Saigh, document after prepared document on Liturgy, Revelation, the Church, Bishops, Priests and the Laity was thrown out. Among those who then proceeded to rethink everything that had been prepared, were at least two South Africans, Archbishop Hurley and Bishop Gerard van Velsen. Hurley, who had written a challenging article on the need for seminary reform (Hurley 1962 in Denis 1997:12-20), would play a key role in the Seminaries Commission (Hurley 2005:147-157) and would co-author much of the approved document on priestly formation, *Optatem Totius* (promulgated 1965). Van Velsen was appointed to the new Commission on Christian Unity (SC 27 February 1963) that would produce the decree *Unitatis redintegratio* (promulgated 1964).

How did the SC see all this? A few months before the opening session, the editor Stubbs had noted the importance of the council at a time of growing East-West political crisis (indeed it would meet during the Cuban Missile Crisis) (SC Editorial 18 July 1962), while another correspondent, Fr Desmond Hatton, had seen it as needing to address missions and missionary activity (SC 25 July 1962). Stubbs had even expected some level of criticism voiced at the Council (SC 29 August 1962:6). Most of all, the paper seemed interested in the fact, pointed out by historian Fr J E Brady OMI, that 32 South African bishops would participate, as opposed to only

one at Vatican I (SC 26 September 1962: 5). Not surprisingly, the departures of the bishops were covered with great front-page razzmatazz.

As the dramatic news from Rome reached South Africa, however, the SC took a more cautious line. A rather defensive editorial remarked that “Everyman [sic] may be misled by what he reads in [the secular press] about the Council” and that

the prudent reader should be slow to believe first news of the Council’s doings and decisions. His paper may be an excellent one. But its prime concern is not religion. With all deference, therefore, on its reports of this great gathering the sensible Catholic will wait to see whether what he reads fits in with what he already knows, or is confirmed by a good Catholic source (SC 24 October 1962:6).

The caution of the SC was reflected in the fact that it relied for most of its news on the global Catholic News Service and on Catholic newspapers elsewhere in the English-speaking world. Stubbs had attended the opening of the Council but could not stay on. In subsequent years of the Council, the SC appointed a “Special Correspondent” (revealed after the end of the Council to be Archbishop Denis Hurley) to give eyewitness reports from Rome. In contrast to the “scandalous” but accurate insider accounts of “Xavier Rynne” (professor Francis Xavier Murphy CSsR), Hurley’s reportage was largely based on what was public knowledge, no doubt helped by his friend, the *Time* magazine correspondent Robert Blair Kaiser (Kaiser 2001:42-48).

What *did* change dramatically in the SC was the tone and scope of writings by local Catholics from the end of the First Session onwards. The caution and parochialism of what had largely gone before disappeared. Lay Catholics and clergy alike, inspired no doubt by the sense of change and the legitimacy of asking questions, started to address all kinds of questions hitherto not examined.

Apart from the by now more common debates on apartheid in the letters pages, including some by prominent Catholics in the Liberal and Progressive parties, there were a few incisive postmortems of the First Session. In a letter, Hurley defended the rejection of the schema on Divine Revelation (SC 30 January 1963:7) as a sign that “the bishops ... came to the Council determined to throw off the shackles of the past and make the Council what Pope John wants it to be – positive, pastoral, ecumenical.” The SC also reported him saying in a Lenten pastoral letter that it had marked an end of an era and a beginning of a new one. The Church could never be the same again, he added later (SC 20 March 1963:1; SC 3 April 1963:2). Similarly, Bishop van Velsen (of Kroonstad) insisted that Catholics should be worried about Christian disunity, saying that two reformations (Protestant and Catholic) were inappropriate: “there should only have been one” (SC 20 February 1963:1).

As the idea of constructive criticism became more acceptable (e.g. SC 5 June 1963, Editorial, 6; SC 5 June 1963, letter from M C Crichton on a report of a talk by Hans Kung in London in SC 22 May 1963), Catholic correspondents started to broaden their vision. In a full-page article “The City of God: A reply to Our Times”, Therese-Marie Meyer discussed the controversial views of Anglican bishop John Robinson (SC 12 June 1963:8). She summed up Robinson’s piece in *The Observer*, in essence a condensation of his book *Honest to God* (Robinson 1962), and made some observations. Her view of Robinson’s call for a secular Christianity (rooted in what many today would call a misreading to a greater or lesser degree of Bonhoeffer, Tillich and Bultmann) was that it was a deeply flawed “intellectual tour-de-force”. Though she agreed that if Christian faith was to survive, it had to be presented in modern idiom (an idea that one can see as thoroughly conciliatory in provenance for Catholics), she rejected his attempt as she saw it to

destroy the substance with the form; a critical distinction which Dr Robinson has not grasped; and which places him in the direct line of descent from those former onetime sons of the Church who, with equal zeal set out upon an essay in adaptation between the Faith and the times (SC 12 June 1963:8),

an obvious reference to the Modernists, no doubt.

Whatever the truth of her observations on the “Modernists” (assuming they existed outside of Vatican nightmares), the fact that she takes Robinson seriously and implies that he is or was a “son of the Church” is instructive on how far the Council’s new vision had permeated. A correspondent quite dramatically said in response that Robinson had a point – indeed that his ideas were less radical than Meyer perhaps thought (SC 26 June 1963, letter from June Trautmann, 7). Meyer’s reply to this letter asserted that *Honest to God* did indeed demolish Christian dogma while raising the threat of the permissive “new morality” of situation ethics (SC 10 July 1963:7). Faced with this excitement, the editor did what any good journalist would do – called in a theologian to review the book.

The review (SC 10 July 1963:5), by the distinguished South African Dominican Timothy McDermott, attempted to strike a balance. He recognised the good intention behind Robinson’s book, but felt that he was guided too much by the “spirit of the age”, a certain romanticism attracted to cultural “revolution”. While rightly

aware of an evolution towards “adulthood” and secularity, Robinson moves too far towards anthropocentrism. Robinson’s conclusions that God is wholly immanent, are also too overstated to be helpful. In short, McDermott found the book interesting but deeply flawed. Noticeably absent from the review was any claim of heresy or even that Catholics should avoid the book. (Perhaps it was too late: many Catholic intellectuals had already read it).

While perhaps a local sideshow, a storm in a library, this incident illustrates a growing awareness of the need for less paternalist thinking on the part of clergy vis-à-vis laity. The interim editor of SC, Fr Lynch, commented in an editorial shortly before the start of the Second Session:

It has never been part of the teaching of the Church that she is made up of shepherds who alone are active and a flock that are sheep, just sheep to be led to pastures where they much comfortably, lazily, unproductively ... Unfortunately the idea of a passive laity has been bequeathed to us from centuries during which the Church, facing a revolt which almost overthrew her, was forced into a position of self-defence, and much of her legislation dealt with anathemas and prohibitions.

Such a situation, he concluded, could not and should not continue (SC 4 September 1963:6). The Council was not about such passivity. Subsequently, Lynch commented on the need for all Catholics who “stay behind” to enter into the same “mood of reflection over the past and concern for the future” (SC 25 September 1963) as those shortly to return to the Council. This did not entail simply criticism of the Church (whether by conservatives or progressives), but also commitment to the *aggiornamento* process.

Presciently, during the Second Session, Fr Lynch noted that “[t]he Second Vatican Council and the racial crisis in our country are by no means unrelated” (SC 16 October 1963:6). With its vision of making Christianity a “living and effective force in the modern world” for peace, unity and happiness, it could only challenge the racism of the apartheid state, even if it did not make explicit reference to it. He noted that “[u]p to now Christianity has had very little effect upon the total situation in South Africa” and hoped that the Council would have a more positive effect. He was right. During and after the Council the Church took on apartheid rule more strongly, largely directed by the efforts of Denis Hurley, who found time to present the 1964 Hoernlé Memorial Lecture. Summed up in its title “Apartheid; A Crisis of the Christian Conscience” (in Denis 1997:58-80), it not only anticipated Hurley’s subsequent commitment to the struggle, but also prefigured in tone the kind of vision of an activist Church engaged with the “joy and hope, the grief and anguish” of humankind that the final and crowning Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) would proclaim in its introduction. The freedom the Council gave the Church would also give Catholics the space to claim the right to disagree with the Church over apartheid.

The second, third and fourth sessions

I cannot in a short presentation adequately present the impact of the remaining sessions of Vatican II on South African Catholics. In some ways, the dramatic events of the First Session and its aftermath created the climate in which the rest of the Council was received. There were numerous changes that had an effect on the South African Catholic community (Egan 2011:5-8, 56-58).

- The shift from Latin to the vernacular liturgy, an innovation probably expected even before the Council – but not the full vernacularisation that followed!
- The collegiality of bishops and their common governance of the Church in union with the Pope (but never without him)
- The promotion of Ecumenism, including interfaith dialogue and respect, but particularly a commitment to Christian unity epitomised in a “first step” by the abolition of nasty and hurtful epithets [”heretics” for Protestants, “schismatics” for Orthodox] in favour of “separated brethren”
- Commitment to religious freedom and freedom of conscience
- The renewed commitment to Social Justice and human rights
- The insistence on the importance and vocation of the laity and the need for a more collaborative role between them, clergy and bishops in leading the Church

Obviously, these reforms cannot and should not be seen in isolation: they are interconnected with each other and with other elements like the renewal of the priesthood and religious life, including the formation of clergy and religious. Three things, however, were omitted from reform and another was largely overlooked: the question of reform of the Roman Curia, the issues of priestly celibacy and the prohibition on artificial birth control, as well

as very little reflection on the role of women in the Church (outside of the religious life or the family). As we shall see, they came back to bite the Church with a vengeance!

Throughout this period the SC continued reporting on the Council – international wire service reports, the “Special Correspondent” and increasingly contributions from distinguished theologians, *periti* in Rome like Ratzinger, Rahner, Schillebeeckx and Hans Kung. Growing excitement over the the laity or the collegiality of bishops, for example, led to fairly measured editorials by Louis Stubbs (once again editor after a sojourn in Rome). As the degree of collegiality was being discussed, Stubbs noted that no formal definition had been agreed upon, but that a balance would have to be struck between Rome and the local church, between the universal and the particular (Editorial, SC 20 November 1965:6). Similarly, he held that Catholic triumphalism, sharply challenged by many in Rome, was a “quasi-vice” that violated truth: it was good to be proud of the Church but taken to the extreme was “a dangerous self-deception, a disservice to the Church itself, and to our neighbour” (Editorial, SC 8 January 1964:6).

The changes in the liturgy were the reforms most often discussed within the pages of SC, particularly by laity who were by no means all in favour of the vernacular. Some feared that the Eucharist would become so like Protestant services that its distinctiveness would be lost, a few even suggesting that such a change would undermine the growing “African missions”. Others, including the all too rare black voices in the SC, commented that this was nonsense. On the same letter page (e.g. SC 11 March 1964:7) one could find a plea for “slow change”, while another correspondent complained bitterly about the “needless delay” in implementation of the Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Consilium* (promulgated 1963).

For progressive bishops like Hurley, Van Velsen and McCann (Cape Town), liturgical reform was essential; Hurley would later head up the International Commission on English in the Liturgy that produced the 1973 common English translation. Even a fairly reticent South African bishop, Hugh Boyle of Johannesburg (not one of the vocal South Africans in Rome), strongly supported it. While recognising it was not easy “to give up the habits of a lifetime” (a nod to conservatives), he emphasised that it “had the sanction of Holy Mother Church [and could be] taken as an expression of the will of God” (SC 12 February 1964:2), noting that all liturgical reforms should be carefully implemented with due pastoral sensitivity.

Similarly, the call for ecumenism was taken up in the SC, largely through reports of talks, articles and letters by bishops like Hurley, Garner, Van Velsen and Whelan. While some (as one might expect, notably Hurley and Van Velsen) were enthusiastic promoters of a faster implementation, other were more cautious. Responding to a conservative lay Catholic, VG Davies, Van Velsen indicated that the purpose of ecumenism was not the “protestantisation” of the Church, but a growth towards mutual understanding, recognition of past mistakes leading to common conversion (Letters SC 5 August 1964:7). This was a far cry from the at best tentative, and more often than not, apologetics-oriented ecumenism of the pre-Council period in South Africa (cf Denis 2011: 546-570).

Archbishop John Garner of Pretoria was quick to define limits: ecumenical prayer services and occasional ‘shared pulpits’ were OK, intercommunion was not.

The slogan “Unity not Uniformity” has been shouted at us, he said, as if to bludgeon us into accepting that unity means nothing more than agreeing about the things on which we agree, and keeping perpetual silence about the things that divide us. This sort of unity may appeal to some; others regard it as perilous (SC 8 April 1964:5).

His caution would be somewhat vindicated by certain readings of *Unitatis redintegratio*, particularly those that would come from Rome after the Council.

In the meantime, many South African Catholics, particularly students, intellectuals and seminarians threw themselves into ecumenical movements, ranging from the Christian Institute to the University Christian Movement, and including a number of initiatives between theological colleges and seminarian groups like Intersem (cf. SC 29 July 1964:5). Growing numbers of lay people, inspired by the accounts of what was coming from Council, developed hitherto unheard of interest in theology, so much so that a new initiative – a Theology Correspondence Course (later to be integrated into the Theological Education by Extension College) – was started by the Dominicans, who were at that stage the undisputed Catholic theological avant garde (SC 23 March 1964:8). A lay magazine, *Challenge*, was produced by theologically and politically liberal Catholics (many of them connected to the Liberal Party).

All of this led perhaps to a question: were things going too fast? In an editorial attempt to address this, particularly in relation to the liturgy which affected all South African Catholics, Louis Stubbs suggested that, on the one hand

[t]he living thing that cannot adapt itself to changing conditions perishes. Now the Church, indeed, cannot perish. But its powers for good can weaken to man’s [sic] loss, if it does not take account of changing circumstances ... On the other hand, those who want bigger and brisker

changes must remember that the Church is older and wiser than they, and, being Catholic, views a wider horizon ... (SC 6 May 1964:6).

While appearing platitudinous and a little condescending, Stubbs' comments probably resonated with many Catholics confused by the sudden changes. What it could not do was change the fact that perhaps inevitably, and even necessarily, the reforms of Vatican II were polarising members of the Church.

If this seems dramatic, perhaps one should see the other side of the picture. Some Catholic intellectuals felt that Catholics as a whole, including the clergy, were largely indifferent to the changes and apathetic. In a speech to the Kolbe Association in October 1964, Martin Versfeld charged that public Lenten lectures on the Council were generally poorly attended and reflected badly on clergy and laity alike. The accusation that the lectures were "too intellectual" he argued, "heresies ... against the intellect". Lay Catholics in particular had to contribute to the debate in the Church and society:

I realize very well that the clergy are busy and overworked. But that is precisely one of the reasons why the Church and the Holy Father asks for healthy and autonomous lay activity, and why those who are serious about his intentions should support the formation of an intelligent laity (SC 28 October 1964:2).

As Vatican II came to an end amidst a flurry of documents – statements, decrees and constitutions passed in the last few weeks of the Fourth Session – the sense of change was pervasive. During 1965, sometimes in anticipation of these decrees, Catholics were already preparing for life in a radically changed Church. Seminarians were studying theology with documents as they were being promulgated; in many seminaries in southern Africa joint conferences were being to address what being a priest would be like in the future. Some were even speculating that Paul VI would relax the requirement of celibacy in the western Church [In fact, he did not, deciding in 1967 to maintain the status quo.]. Many were grappling with the meaning of religious liberty, dialogue with non-Catholics, other faiths or non-believers. As the Council wound up, there was even a plea by a group of women, the St Joan's Alliance, calling for the hierarchy to consider ordaining women to the diaconate and later the priesthood (SC 13 October 1965:4).

Once again, in the closing days of the Council, Fr Stubbs editorialised:

Some, perhaps, have expected too much of the Council. They have expected immediate and complete solutions to all problems; but the Council is not omniscient, nor omnipotent ... Some have been unsettled by the Council, by the open and frank discussion of certain traditional views and practices, views and practices that they have wrongly accepted as essential to the faith ... None of us may feel that the work of the Council is ended; it is now that throughout the whole Church the work of implementing the directions of the Council must become more and more effectively done (Editorial, SC 8 December 1965:6).

By the end of Vatican II it seems clear that Stubbs supported what the Council had achieved. Basically a centrist throughout the period, he'd tried to achieve a balance in reporting and in commentary – including trying to have a fairly representative sample of lay and clergy correspondents engaging in debate. While some saw the Council as a disaster that would take 50 years to repair, and others saw it just as a start, the sense one gets from SC is that most South African Catholics were generally keen to implement what had been achieved.

The aftermath of the Council until *Humanae Vitae* (1968)

The years following Vatican II were dramatic throughout the Church, not least in South Africa. One immediate fruit of it, not easily noticed in the pages of SC (which remained a white-centred newspaper), was the growth of liturgical and theological inculturation, including the slow emergence of Catholic black theologies. The Council also gave much impetus to the pursuit of justice and peace as a mission/ministry within the Church, a fruit of *Gaudium et Spes*.

However, the three unaddressed issues of the Council – celibacy, contraception and the Curia – remained. In the post-1965 exhilaration they were ever-present challenges amidst mounting confusion.

True to its mission as a semi-official national paper, the SC reported faithfully on the post-conciliar Church: drawing as ever on mainstream international catholic wire services for global news, it also reported local news and provided a forum for ongoing discussion amidst often haphazard liturgical reforms, catechetical reforms, theological controversies and thoroughgoing change. It published international authors of note, reviewed the seemingly endless books about the Council that were published and commissioned local theologians to address points of interest ranging from reinterpretation of the Catholic Catechism to responses to new bible translations like the Jerusalem Bible.

Lay Catholics too gained a stronger, robust voice – and often a face: where previously just named, correspondents had photographs and biographies. Many lay intellectuals wrote about the meaning of implementing the Council. Academics like Colin Gardner wrote about the need to make Christian worship understandable to non-believers (SC 5 January 1966, 5); editorials asked daring questions like “Is God Dead?” (SC May 18 1966:6) [Answer: No, of course not, not even unwell!]. Another lay correspondent, David Newmarch, talked about the church and the new approach to worship as an experience of a community of love (SC 23 November 1966:5), while the Dominicans argued that the new world the Church was in demanded new images of God (SC 15 February 1966).

This attempt to cope with rapid change was addressed by the editor (still Louis Stubbs) who noted how some had begun to wonder what had happened to their faith. Such worry, he concluded, though understandable was needless:

What matters ... are not the views voiced by individuals, however famous, but what the Church, guided by [the Holy] Spirit, recognizes and accepts as true, and makes its own (Editorial, SC 30 March 1966:6).

A major crisis was coming, however, in the form of *Humanae Vitae*.

An unresolved, unaddressed issue of Vatican II was the Church’s prohibition of artificial birth control. While many bishops at the Council wanted to address it, Paul VI reserved the issue for a Vatican Commission to discuss it. The history of the Papal Commission (Kaiser [1985] 2012) is well-known and shall not be rehearsed in great detail here: weighted with conservatives opposed to liberalisation of the rules, through a process of discussion, the majority came to a dramatic conclusion – that many couples should be allowed to use artificial birth control to regulate family size. A minority complained to Paul VI that if this were adopted, the Church, and particularly the Papacy, would lose all authority. Coming at a time of dramatic changes, not all of them happy, Paul VI felt obliged to accept the minority view. The result was the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968) which endorsed the status quo, against the growing expectations of Catholics around the world. Ironically, if its intention was to stem the growing dissent, it had a dramatically converse effect in many parts of the Church, not least in South Africa.

A careful reading of “news from Rome” should have alerted Catholics to what was going to happen: Pope Paul VI was increasingly uneasy with what he saw as, what one commentator called, a “runaway church”. Nonetheless, the promulgation of HV on July 29 1968 created a storm of controversy and highlighted the conservative/liberal tension in the postconciliar Church in South Africa.

On the front page of the August 7 1968 SC, three different episcopal views were expressed. Archbishop Garner opined that no-one should have been surprised – it was after all Church teaching. Cardinal McCann of Cape Town was more equivocal, noting that the Pope had spoken and was the Church’s supreme teaching authority. Denis Hurley of Durban, having noted that the decision was one of the most difficult Paul VI had had to face, commented that he felt “torn in half” by HV. All three accepted that the Pope *had* the authority to teach, but both McCann and Hurley noted the traditional Catholic moral precept rooted in Thomism: that people had to follow their formed and informed conscience.

At the bottom of the page, three prominent Cape Town Catholic doctors recorded their dismay at the encyclical. Their objections were scientifically based – that lack of contraception caused fear of sex, frigidity and tensions in families with many children, and added a burden to the poor, particularly poor women. A woman doctor (and mother of six children) noted her experience with poor women living in unstable marriages (often further exacerbated by the migrant labour system in South Africa) for whom the Rhythm Method simply could not work. Her conclusion:

My own *cri de coeur* ...: Where has the loving concern of the Good Shepherd gone? (SC 7 August 1968:1).

Within the same issue, some observers called the encyclical “impossible to follow”. The editor, by now once again Fr Con Lynch, noted the disappointment of many while acknowledging that the Pope had taken a stance he believed was right and had every authority to take:

[W]hat Pope Paul has in effect done is to have authoritatively interpreted the status of a long and clear tradition within the Church that contraception is sinful. [*In fact, Lynch’s claim has been disputed. Even as Paul VI was deliberating what to do, a book by John T Noonan (1966) was published, revealing a more complex tradition. Evidently Paul VI either never heard about it, never read it, or simply overlooked its conclusions*]. In the teeth of considerable opposition he has endorsed the view of those who held that the Church’s traditional belief ... was so unanimous that

it must be considered to be part of her unalterable heritage...and is therefore a true reflection of the moral law (Editorial, SC 7 August 1968:4).

However, he continued, since it was not defined infallibly, the teaching could change if “a goodly number of bishops felt obliged to express their belief to the contrary”.

On the same page, Andrew Murray, a layman observed that the encyclical had in fact failed to settle the question:

Instead, it has reopened it in an acuter form and with it several other important questions – the relation between conscience and authority, the role of the laity in collegiality, how far an encyclical should be based on worldwide consultation – have become critical.

He himself hoped that the document would be followed by a papal statement on lay responsibility, a text that would help lay people make moral decisions for themselves. Next to this piece, Dominican Timothy McDermott also highlighted that the encyclical would cause a conflict of conscience, a crisis of authority, and could even generate a lay “rebellion”.

In the letters page too lay response was already forthcoming, divided as one had come to expect during the Council period between pious and enthusiastic endorsement, and horror. Reports elsewhere in this and subsequent issues recorded similar divided views among priests and religious.

The most famous clergy dissent occurred the following week (SC 14 August 1968:1). Eleven Dominican priests in Stellenbosch expressed conscientious objection to HV. While welcoming the humane tone of the text and the Pope’s concern that families not be subjected to “progressive dehumanisation”, they were concerned that the text was shortcut revelation and natural law.

In particular, we cannot see how the conclusion that “each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life” follows from the true Christian principle that married partners have a duty to transmit human life and be responsible parents.

While acknowledging the authority of the Church to make such decisions, not simply to inform consciences, they insisted that they had failed to help people to dialogue between authority and conscience. It was not enough simply to appeal to texts, but to inform conscience through “prayer, study and consultation.”

In response, the editorial emphasised the need for properly formed and informed conscience:

I can never treat the judgment of authority, any authority whatever as a substitute for my own conscience – as long as I remain a free, responsible agent (Editorial, SC 14 August 1968:6).

With these and many subsequent articles, letters and polemics, the divisions within the Catholic Church in South Africa, as elsewhere, became brutally manifest. If, as some have suggested, HV was meant to put an end to the “runaway church”, it had the opposite effect: for those who saw Vatican II as real change, real empowerment, it expressed their deepest fears – Rome was backtracking. For the conservatives it simply showed how badly wrong the Church had gone between 1962 and 1965.

Conclusion

Long as this article has been, it has only skimmed the surface. It has tried to show how the Council changed the face of Catholicism in South Africa. Somewhere between the First and Second Session of Vatican II, a new mood of engagement swept into the Catholic laity and some of the clergy, making them more critical of their Church and willing to engage with the question the Council was surfacing. Subsequent developments – including the crisis generated by *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, but not ending there by any means – show how far the Catholic Church as people of God have come.

Having noted that, it should be apparent that this paper has serious limitations. It hardly addresses the reception of the Council by the (then and now) black majority of Catholic South Africans. A new article by Philippe Denis (Denis 2013) promises to address at least the specific question of apartheid and the Council. This fact is both a reflection of the audience of the SC, however “official” it might have seemed, and the wider fact that for the most part black Catholics were largely invisible in the 1960s Church, as they had been since the 19th century (cf Zwane 1982; Mukuka 2008). On a positive note, it can be argued (no doubt in future) that the Second Vatican Council gave the Church the theological tools with which it would later fight more fiercely the struggle for liberation in South Africa. And more often than not, it was precisely the strongest supporters of the Council, like Denis Hurley, who became the strongest “guardians of the light” of freedom.

Works consulted

Primary sources

The Southern Cross, consulted for the period 1961-1968.

Published sources

- Abraham, G. 1989. *The Catholic Church and Apartheid: the response of the Catholic Church to the first decade of National Party rule 1948-1957*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- Brain, JB. 1991. *The Catholic Church in the Transvaal*. Johannesburg: Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.
- Brain, JB. & Denis, P. (eds.) 1999. *The Catholic Church in Contemporary Southern Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.
- Brown, WE. 1960. *The Catholic Church in South Africa: From the Origins to the Present Day*. London: Burns & Oates.
- Collins, CB. [nd]. *Where the river runs* (A Memoir). <http://colincollins.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Where-the-river-runs.pdf>. (Accessed 8 August 2013).
- Denis, P. (ed.) 1997. *Facing the Crisis: Selected Texts of Archbishop D E Hurley*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.
- Denis, P. 2011. Reunion of Christendom or Ecumenism? Relations between Catholics and Protestants before Vatican II in the South African magazine *The Southern Cross*. *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 106(3-4), 546-570.
- Denis, P. 2013. Archbishop Denis Hurley's strange silence on apartheid at Vatican II. *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 89(3) [publication due December].
- Egan, A. 1991. *The Politics of a South African Catholic Student Movement 1960-1987*. Cape Town: UCT Centre for African Studies.
- Egan, A. 1999. Catholic Intellectuals, in Brain, JB & Denis, P (eds.), *The Catholic Church in Contemporary South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 314-348.
- Egan, A. 2011. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). *Trefoil* 278(5-8), 56-58.
- Henriques, A. 1997. Vatican II and the *Southern Cross*. *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Southern Africa and Africa* 4(1), 31-39.
- Hurley, DE. 2005. *Vatican II: keeping the dream alive*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.
- Kaiser, RB. [1985] 2012. *The politics of sex and religion: a case study in the development of doctrine 1962-1984*. 2nd Revised edition. <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/151118>. (Accessed 8 August 2013).
- Kaiser, RB. 2001. Understanding the Implications of Pope John's *Aggiornamento* in Gamley, A (ed.), *Denis Hurley: a portrait by friends*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 42-48.
- Kearney, P. 2009. *Guardian of the light. Denis Hurley: renewing the church, opposing apartheid*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu Natal Press.
- Madges, W. & Daly, MJ. (eds.) 2003. *Vatican II: Forty Personal Stories*. Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications.
- Mukuka, GS. 2008. *The other side of the story: the silent experience of the Black Clergy in the Catholic Church in South Africa (1898-1976)*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.
- Noonan, JT. 1965. *Contraception: a history of its treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Councils*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- O'Malley, JW. 2008. *What happened at Vatican II?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Robinson, JAT. 1962. *Honest to God*. London: SCM Press.
- Zwane, M. 1982. Black Catholics, in Prior, A (ed.), *Catholics in Apartheid Society*. Cape Town: David Philip: 113-123.