

Myths, Meaning and Vatican III

Commenting on unfinished business for the Church, Fr. Greeley suggests an agenda for a future Vatican III. He sees man's answers to the basic religious issue as centered on 'six central myths' of Christian faith

Enough years have passed since the close of Vatican II for us to be able to state with some confidence what happened in the Council and what did not happen, what tasks the Council successfully accomplished and what challenges remain to be wrestled with in the remaining decades of the 20th century.

It seems to me that there are four principal accomplishments of the Council:

1. The fixed, immutable, unquestionable structure of the Church's organization and theory that had persisted for centuries was definitely opened up. The symbol of Pope John's wide open window, never to be closed again, is reflected in the Constitution on the Church, which represented a decisive turning away from the juridical and apologetic approach to the Church that had been typical of most of Catholic theology for several centuries.

2. The principle of collegiality provided the Church with an organizational theme which, on the theoretical level, can serve as the basis for profoundly changing the routinized patterns of behavior that had given shape and form to the Church for several centuries. Even if the Church organization of the future has not yet come into being, at least the principle is there according to which it can begin.

3. With the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,

Catholicism officially opened itself up not merely to the possibility of dialogue with separated brother Christians, but to the whole vast culture that we call the modern world. Science, technology, political democracy and humanism were no longer things to be wary of and to warn the faithful against. They now represented basically benign influences whose defenders and practitioners could be treated as sincere men of good will.

4. The Constitutions on the Church and on Divine Revelation created the beginnings of a theological context within which Catholicism could address the modern world and also address its own membership to the extent that the membership is deeply involved in the modern world.

These accomplishments, while they represent only beginnings, ought none the less not to be minimized. For if they are only beginnings, they are at least good beginnings. But it would be a serious mistake to pretend that they are more than that.

There were, on the other hand, three "major" failures of the Vatican II, though in the nature of things it certainly would have been too much to expect that the Council could cope with the sorts of problems implied by these failures.

1. Even though the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy was a beautiful theoretical document, it did not address itself to the most critical problem—its own implementation. It assumed, quite naively from the point of view of the sociologist, that it was possible to achieve the goals of liturgical renewal through the existing parish structures. There have been many criticisms of the failure of the new liturgy to produce all the happy effects that it seemed to promise. Most of the criticisms have focused on the erratic and frequently unpredictable modifications that have been made, it seems, almost every year since the end of the Council. Many bishops and priests have argued that the "people" are confused. In fact, however, the people do not seem to be all that confused. One is afraid, rather, that the bishops and clergy in question are engaging in what psychiatrists call projection.

It is unfortunate that the changes could not have been introduced all at once. It is unfortunate that better educational programs did not accompany the changes. It is even more unfortunate that the liturgy became a political football in the ongoing battles between the progressives and the conservatives of the Roman Curia. But the real problem of liturgical renewal is not the pace and direction of the modification of ceremonies, particularly since in many countries the ability of the Congrega-

tion on Rites or a national episcopal conference to control liturgical change has practically vanished. The real problem has been that the liturgy, which is clearly designed to celebrate intimate community, becomes quite meaningless in a large Sunday congregation where there is no intimate community. Turning to one's neighbor just before communion, shaking hands with him and wishing him peace is a pleasant exercise. But if one's neighbor in church happens to be a stranger before the "handshake of peace," he is also a stranger after it. Liturgical ceremony does not create intimate community. On the contrary, it celebrates it and reinforces it. Presumably, Vatican Council III, which one trusts is convened at least before 1975, will address itself to the critically important question of the structure of the local worshiping community. Until this question is handled, liturgical renewal is doomed to be substantially less than a success.

2. While the intentions of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in Modern World were certainly excellent, its sociological and economic assumptions are at best naive. (The Church's continuing failure to demonstrate any more than passing concern about the world's population problem is, of course, intolerable.) It is essentially a sociological document written by men who, it is much to be feared, are sociological amateurs. Their basic assumption of a unidirectional, continuous and genetic social change involving progress from the sacred to the secular is simply unacceptable. (And the watered-down Marxism of Fr. Jean Lebreton in *Populorum Progressio*, the encyclical on development, should, I think, be unacceptable to most students of world economics.) The survival of the primordial and the ethnic in an industrializing world, despite all predictions to the contrary, confounds some of the most basic assumptions of the naive sociology that went into the Constitution. It is to be hoped that Vatican III, in addition to addressing itself with the most serious urgency to the population problem, will take a much more careful look at the complexities of the modern world.

3. Nor was any real attempt made at Vatican II to develop catechetical

styles for presenting the Good News of the Christian faith in modern times. Perhaps this failure was inevitable because the Council was in effect the beginning of a theological revival and not the maturation of one. Unfortunately, in the absence of an appropriate catechetical style, the problem of educating or re-educating the Catholic population to the rather different Church that emerged after the Council has become most serious. In the English-speaking world, at least, a grave disservice has been done to many devout Catholics. They were raised with one vision of the Church as an essentially fixed, immutable religious form; they found themselves suddenly transported into a very different vision of the Church in which change, growth and openness were emphasized. While, by and large, they seem rather pleased with the new Church, it must be said in all candor that little attempt has been made either to explain the reason for the change or the theology which permits us to assert that a changing



Church is a more desirable Church than an immobile Church. Their confusion is not so much over the new liturgy, or the vanishing of Friday abstinence and St. Christopher; their confusion is over the critical Christian question, which, incidentally, is not, "What must I believe?" but rather, "What should I believe?"

It often seems, in fact, that the papacy, hierarchy and clergy are so concerned with working out their own identity crises that they have forgotten all about the laity and are quite incapable of hearing the rising demand for religious meaning that the laity are making. It is much to be hoped, therefore, that Vatican III will be in fact what Vatican II claimed to be: a pastoral council, that is to say, a council concerned about the reformulation of

the Gospel message, so that it does represent something meaningful to a Christian laity ever more desirous of religious meaning.

One must comment in passing on the extraordinary shallowness of much that passes for reform in religious education at the present time. Many of the so-called practitioners of religious education have seemed more interested in telling people what they could not believe any longer than in presenting the core of Christian belief. It seems frequently that a course or two in summer school sessions, or perhaps a year in a "religious education" program, has persuaded many religious educators that they are in fact theologians. Some of the most incredibly naive psychological, sociological and pedagogical nonsense has masqueraded as solemn theory for religious education; and almost each year a new catchword or a new gimmick is advanced with far more confidence than humility as the answer to the catechetical problem. Perhaps the most popular of these "answers" has been the so-called "salvation history" school of catechetics, which, incidentally, is frequently a very much watered down and simplified version of the salvation history approach of Scripture analysis. A whole generation of religious educators have gone forth dogmatically convinced that salvation history was the answer. It of course turned out not to be the answer at all, a result that led some religious educators to leave the priesthood and religious life, others simply to deny the facts and proceed blindly ahead with their salvation history as a technique, and yet others to search for another prepackaged magic answer.

The search for prepackaged answers promulgated by "experts" seems to be an unavoidable phenomenon of the post-Vatican Church as many immature personalities attempt to replace a discarded collection of certainties with a brand new collection of certainties. There have been far too many "experts"—whose credentials, incidentally, generally leave much to be desired—who have been only too willing to appear on the scene with such certainties. It is to be hoped, there-

fore, that Vatican III be concerned not so much with prepackaged catechetical programs as with a new style of religious education that does facilitate the Church's response to the religious needs of man in the modern world, needs that—despite the dogmatic proponents of secularism—are every bit as strong as they were at any other time in human history.

I should like, therefore, to make a "modest suggestion" for consideration at Vatican III. Taking my lead from a point made by Paul Ricoeur, in his *Symbolism and Evil*, I would suggest that our concern ought to be with "the interpretation of myths." Religion, I assume, is a "meaning system"; that is to say, a series of responses to the most basic and fundamental questions a man can ask. What is the nature of the real? What is the purpose of human life? Does good triumph over evil or evil, good? Is reality gracious or hostile? Does life triumph over death or death over life? How does the good man live? I further assume that no man is without a meaning system and that the symbol "God" is a convenient way of summing up our answers to these fundamental religious questions. I finally assume that, while a man may use any set of symbols, from symbolic logic to Aristotelian philosophy, to express his answers to the religious questions, the normal way most men have used has been their sacred story or the myth.

In many Catholic circles the use of the word "myth" creates a great deal of discomfort, for myth is assumed to be something that is "not true," or a fable, or a legend, or a pious fairy story. In fact, of course, this is not the way myth is used by most contemporary students of mythology. A myth is rather an interpretation of the meaning

of reality, something that the myth-maker perceives as very true indeed; far more true than a simple historical narrative. We do not have in the myth a video-tape "instant reply" of historical events; we have, rather, a profound and serious attempt to interpret the meaning of the events. Myth is used in the same way that St. Paul uses the word "mysterion," a reality which purports to reveal an even greater reality. The Resurrection, for example, is a myth. This is not to say that it is false, or that it is a fable, or that it is not an historical event. Beyond all question the early Christians had a profound experience of Christ after His death. There is no other conceivable explanation of the enthusiasm with which they committed themselves to the spread of Christianity. An attempt to explain the precise nature of this post-Crucifixion experience of Christ is, of course, very important, but if one does not get beyond the theological explanation of the "how" of the Resurrection to the "what," one has sadly missed the point.

But the most important question that can be asked about the Resurrection is: "What does it symbolize?" That is to say, what does the Resurrection tell us about the ultimate nature of reality? The Christian response to this question is, of course, one of the most staggeringly optimistic responses that man has ever offered. For the Christian says that the Resurrection symbolizes not only the triumph of goodness over evil, not only the triumph of one man over death, but also the fact that *all* men will eventually triumph over death. If Christianity is to be rejected, one ought to reject it not simply because one believes it impossible for one man to rise from the dead, but because one believes

it absolutely absurd and incredible that all men should rise from the dead.

This, then, is the common and ordinary way that man has used to express religious truth. A myth is simply a symbolic story, one that is frequently told by being enacted in a ritual. Alan Watts describes a myth as "a complex story, some no doubt fact and some fantasy, which for various reasons human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life." According to Watts, in *The Two Hands of God*, the "meaning is divined rather than defined, implicit rather than explicit, suggested rather than stated." He adds: "The language of myth and poetry is integrative, for the language of image is organic language . . . the mythological image is what gives sense and organization to experience."

In a companion volume, *Myths of Creation*, Charles Long argues: "Myth . . . points to the definite manner in which the world is available for man. The word and content of myth are revelations of power." Myths integrate man's total life experience and interpret it for him. They go both higher and lower than scientific propositions.

Mircea Eliade, the greatest among the students of what used to be called comparative religion and now is called history of religions, in his *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, observed: "What we may call symbolic thought makes it possible for man to move freely from one level of reality to another. Indeed 'to move freely' is an understatement; symbols . . . assimilate and unify diverse levels and realities that are to all appearances incompatible."

For most men in the course of human history the telling and retelling of the religious myth was enough. It was not necessary to analyze and explain the myth. The myth itself provided in an implicit and poetic fashion the response to man's fundamental religious questions. But in our day, for three different reasons, the myths must be interpreted.

1. A superficial science assumed that myths were meant to be history in the same sense that modern scientific history is, and therefore they sum-



marily rejected them as fables. Even though more modern research on mythology has passed beyond such simpleminded reaction to myths, the simpleminded reaction still permeates the educational systems of the Western world. It is therefore necessary to explain patiently what mythology is all about.

2. The myth is a poetic approach to reality. Apparently one of the prices we have had to pay for progress of science, or at least for an educational system dominated by positivism, is that our poetic sense is snuffed out rather early in life. We are led to believe that there is only one valid form of knowledge—scientific reasoning—and only one valid form of expression—the language of scientific reasoning—hence, any other modality of thought and expression, and especially that which is basically poetic, is viewed with suspicion and distrust. Even though the current epistemological revolution is asking devastating questions of the positivist assumptions, these assumptions still reign supreme in Western educational circles.

3. Contemporary man has developed to a much higher level of competency than any of his predecessors the powers of abstract thought. He therefore is almost incurably driven to ask the question: "But what does it mean?" To enjoy a passage of poetry, for example, he must puzzle out its meaning. Then, understanding the meaning behind the poetic imagery, he can, at least on occasion, enjoy and appreciate the imagery.

The first two reasons for the necessity of explaining myths are unfortunate and may pass with time. The third reason, however, is one that ought not to be evaluated negatively. Much of the tremendous scientific and technological progress, as well as much of the understanding of human nature on which our great world civilization is built, is rooted in the human propensity to ask why. There is no reason, one suspects, that that propensity need weaken man's capacity to exercise poetic modalities of knowledge and expression. Quite the contrary, it seems altogether likely that the poetic in-

stincts can reinforce scientific reason and vice versa.

If my assumptions are correct, what is required is not, despite Rudolph Bultmann to the contrary, an exercise in demythologizing. It is rather an exercise in explaining and interpreting the myths; that is to say, in expressing in propositional form the religious truths which the myths embody.



In a forthcoming book I shall attempt in considerable detail to engage in myth interpretation. For the moment, it suffices I outline what I consider to be the six central myths of the Christian faiths and indicate the implications of these myths as man's answers to the basic religious issue:

1. Yahweh the covenanter: Unlike the gods of the neighboring peoples who either had to be placated or awakened from sleep, the God of the Jews made a firm and irrevocable commitment to His people, a commitment from which He would not turn away, no matter how great their infidelity. This symbol represents the Israelite conviction that Ultimate Reality was fundamentally good.

2. Yahweh the jealous lover (particularly as described in the Book of Osee): This symbol of the Ultimate Reality pursuing His beloved people as a man would a wife whom he was desperately in love with despite her infidelity represents the Jewish conviction that Ultimate Reality is not only gracious but loving; indeed, passionately, almost blindly, loving.

3. Yahweh promising a messianic age: The messianic mythology of the Deutero-Isaiah and of the book of Daniel symbolizes the Israelite faith that, in the final analysis, good will triumph over evil and eliminate evil from the world.

4. The combination, particularly in St. Mark's gospel, of the myth of the Son of God with the myth of the Suffering Servant. This represents, according to Paul Ricoeur, the most profound of the Christian insights. For it is the Christian conviction that Yahweh fulfilled His promise to bring in the messianic age, in which evil would be conquered by good, precisely by sending His Son as the Suffering Servant. In other words, the Resurrection was made possible by the Cross. Life triumphs over death, but only first by dying.

5. The Eucharistic myth: In this Jesus gathers His band of brothers—His happy few—around a family banquet table, proclaims His unending friendship with His followers, urges them to be friends to one another, and instructs them to continue the banquet as a sign in the cause of friendship. The Eucharistic myth says that the Ultimate Reality not merely loves us so much as to become a Suffering Servant for us, but now proclaims us to be His friends and urges us to bear witness to His Good News by the quality of our love. "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples; that you have love one for another."

6. The Spirit myth: The Spirit is the dancing God of Pentecost. Ultimate Reality comes in fire and wind to move men to religious enthusiasm, to stir them to the depths of their souls in the service of the Good News. I take it that the Pentecostal myth represents the Christian conviction that the Really Real has decided to be dependent on us for completing the messianic age begun with the Death and Resurrection of Jesus. The Spirit comes precisely to stir us with enthusiasm for the messianic mission.

It seems to me that the specifically Christian myths described above are particularly pertinent to the religious problems of the modern world. For, as Brian Wicker has observed, modern humanism with all its admirable emphasis on human self-fulfillment comes

apart in the face of the ugly reality of death. In Wicker's words, "the Christian is merely the humanist who is sure of the ground on which he stands." Furthermore, the Eucharistic myth responds to the search of contemporary man in a polarized world for the conviction that friendship between man and woman, young and old, rich and poor, black and white, is possible. Finally, the Spirit myth reassures modern man, so desperately concerned about personality development, that there is after all some ultimate purpose behind the quest for self-fulfillment.

It will be seen that what I am urging here is an approach to the proclamation of the Christian message that asks what the imagery of the Christian tradition provides in the way of answers to man's fundamental religious needs, for meaning and for community, which all men have experienced in every society that the world has ever known. My argument obviously is in direct disagreement with those who hold that modern man needs no ultimate scheme of interpretation, that he has long since lost the capacity to experience the sacred and the mythological. My strategy is the exact opposite of Bishop James Robinson's, for example, who would have us present to the modern world a thoroughly demythologized Christianity. I can only observe that the good bishop's strategy does not seem to have been very successful at winning converts, perhaps because, like so many other clerics, the bishop thinks that the myth is a fable or a fairy tale. The modern world wants no part of fables, one supposes, but it very much wants explanation, meaning and community. A Christian catechesis that is conscious of the really desperate nature of the meaning-search at the present time might be an extraordinarily effective means of proclaiming Good News that is both good and new.

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HORACIO DE LA COSTA

To Find Itself: A Young Nation's Mission

**Politically free after 400 years of tutelage,
the Philippines is struggling for self-discovery
as a people and nation**

When I was younger, mention of the Philippines inevitably evoked in the American imagination a picture of blue skies and palm-fringed shores, with every other palm tree held upright by a Filipino leaning against it, strumming a guitar. One wonders what the American image of the Philippines is today. Perhaps there is none whatever. Why should there be? Americans have a lot more important things than the Philippines to think about these days. But if there is an image, it must be quite different from that of former years, if only because the realities are different.

Certainly, despite typhoons, earthquakes and assorted calamities, the palm trees are still there, as befits the world's largest exporter of copra. But of the guitar-strumming boys, one has probably gone off to manage a copper mine, another is a Jesuit running for the constitutional convention and a third commands a unit of the new People's Army with a price on his head. It is no longer possible, if it ever was, to think of the Philippines as that most carefree of combinations, a land of the morning where it seems always afternoon.

How think of these islands, then? What is happening in the Philippines? Perhaps the shortest way to describe what we are up to is to say that we are a people trying to find itself. We are trying to find out what we can do by ourselves. If we applied whatever skills we have to the resources God has given us, and if we went about the task in our own way, is there something of value we can achieve that can truly be called our own?

We have been under tutelage for four hundred years—almost from the

beginning of our recorded history. Under tutelage, we were a minor among peoples, as the legislation of imperial Spain quite explicitly put it or—in the phraseology of imperial America—a possession, a dependency, a ward.

Now we are free. We have been free for some time. And we have come to realize that to be free is more than merely to be rid of external constraint. It is, above all, to be self-possessed, as a person is self-possessed. We are trying to acquire a personality, to answer to our own satisfaction certain searching questions. What are we really worth, by ourselves? What do we amount to, and want to be, as a people?

This brings up, of course, the more basic question of whether we can be anything at all. For this is not a particularly propitious time for a small and powerless nation to be striking out on its own. The only answer we can give is that we do not know if, indeed, we can be a nation. All we know is that we must try. We must try to achieve two things: 1) social justice without sacrifice of human rights, and 2) rapid development within the framework of democracy.

Ours is a society in which justice is not conspicuous. It is a society in which by far the greater number have less than human beings have a right to expect, and a very few have more than honest work or native talent have a right to claim. It is necessary, therefore, to equalize both access to resources and opportunity of achievement.

How to go about achieving this goal

