



## Lukas Vischer: Storia del Concilio Vaticano II Reactions and Comments by an Observer at the Council

### 1. Place and Date of Publication

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### 2. Historical Context

Lukas Vischer served the World Council of Churches as research secretary and director of the Commission on Faith and Order from 1961 to 1979. He represented the WCC as one of the ecumenical observers at the II Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church (1962 – 1965). His “Reactions and Comments” refer to the publishing project “The History of Vatican II”, vol. 1 and 2.

### 3. Summary

The major virtue of the two volumes is that they enable one to detect the interplay between public events and internal debates that were hidden from the public at the time. But even though some eminent non-Catholics are listed among the editors, no ecumenical reflection has occurred, and the most striking feature is a tendency to allow the non-Catholic ecumenical movement to fade into the background. Indeed, passages in which the World Council of Churches appears are marked by an unusually negative judgment. - My own account would place the emphases differently.

1. The two volumes consider the World Council of Churches, in view of the limits of its conciliar practice, essentially to be nothing more than a “religious non-governmental organization”. Yet the close relations that had developed among non-Catholic churches since the beginning of the century were the precondition for the network of communications necessary for the success of the II Vatican Council. Numerous topics that were treated at the Council had already been raised at WCC level. WCC general secretary W.A. Visser't Hooft emphasized, for example, from the very start the importance of a declaration on religious freedom and referred to the need for an “address for non-Catholic churches in Rome” which eventually led to the establishment of the Secretariat for Christian Unity. Several of the contacts of this Secretariat came about through the WCC.
2. The authors concede that the ecumenical observers were not only observers but active participants in the Council. Yet they just underline their approving remarks about the conciliar proceedings. - Behind the scene, however, the WCC and some observers drafted interventions for certain bishops and the Secretariat for Christian Unity on such important topics as the church and the world, scripture and tradition, the introduction of the vernacular into Roman Catholic practice, and the prayer for unity.
3. The authors fail to see that the fundamental question of the WCC was how the Roman Catholic Church would fit into the ecumenical movement. Would it look on itself as its centre? Or would there be an acceptance of initiatives within the scope of the ecumenical witness already in evidence? The profound conviction of the WCC was that a way had to be found of making dialogue and common action possible. - The ecumenical movement would probably have reached a different point by now if this approach had been established more successfully.

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TWO HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

World Council of Churches

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# *Storia del Concilio Vaticano II*

Reactions and Comments  
by an Observer at the Council

*Lukas Vischer*

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*Ed. note:* The *History of Vatican II*, the massive publishing project here discussed by a Protestant observer at the Second Vatican Council, had its genesis in the 1988 decision of an international group of scholars “to give generations that have not experienced the conciliar event a tool that will permit them to gain a rigorously critical understanding of its meaning for their own time”. The venture, sponsored by the Istituto per le Scienze Religiose in Bologna, seeks to reconstruct the history of Vatican II “on the basis of a rigorously critical analysis of... all the sources that have been preserved: oral and written, official and unofficial, collective and individual, internal and external”. It seeks to reconstruct not only the course of events before and during the Council, but also “the self-awareness of the assembly and its various components... [and] the dialectical relationship... between the internal climate of the Council and the external context, both in Rome and generally” (p.xii).

The first volume of the *History* treats the announcement of, and preparations for, Vatican II; each of four further volumes will deal with a different period of that Council’s work. The whole series will eventually be published in Italian, German and French, with the English version scheduled for completion in December 2001.

In these “Reactions and Comments” Lukas Vischer refers to the volumes which have so far been published in Italian (I and II), and in English (I) (page numbers refer to the Italian edition). This edited English text is based on John Cumming’s translation of Lukas Vischer’s original German.

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Reading the two already-published volumes of this great work on the Second Vatican Council was an extraordinary experience. It not only reminded me vividly of

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that period but complemented and enriched my memories of the Council in more than one respect. The Council was so multi-faceted an event that even those who took an active part in it did not come face to face with more than one aspect of it. Non-Catholic observers' perception of it was especially restricted. Much of it *had to be* concealed from them, for they were "outsiders". In this respect the two volumes are wonderfully effective. They make clear and in full detail how the proceedings went at all levels, and thus reveal how the decisions taken were actually arrived at. The sources which have been made accessible after thirty years make it possible to fill out the events as they appear from "outside" with a view of the "inside" that is often turbulent — and not always edifying. The major virtue of the two volumes is that they enable one to detect the interplay between public events and internal debates that were hidden from the public at the time.

It will scarcely come as a surprise to know that my — limited — perception of the Council differs from that of both volumes in more than one respect. Particularly in the parts that deal with the ecumenical movement, relations with other churches, the role of the World Council of Churches and the contribution of non-Catholic observers, I fail to recognize the Council as I perceived it. Of course, it is very interesting for a non-Catholic observer to learn how the non-Catholic world is seen and assessed by Catholic writers. Nevertheless, reading these two volumes has confirmed my belief that the converse is also important: to show how the conciliar process was perceived by non-Catholics. I think that two very different images would then emerge. The account of the internal events in the Roman Catholic Church would of course not change, but that of the ecumenical environment within which the Council took place certainly would.

It is, surely, quite in accordance with the broadening ecumenical dimension of the churches that we must start to reflect on the past together. In my opinion that has not occurred in either of these volumes, even though some eminent non-Catholics are listed among the editors responsible for them.

The most striking feature, in my eyes, is a tendency to allow the significance of the non-Catholic ecumenical movement, especially that of the World Council of Churches, to fade into the background. To put it baldly, the ecumenical movement is certainly mentioned but not really portrayed. Indeed, the passages in which the WCC appears are marked by an unusually negative judgment. An account corresponding to my image of the Council would place the emphases in this respect somewhat differently. Above all, it would diverge in essentials from the section on non-Catholic reactions to the first session.<sup>1</sup>

1. However the World Council of Churches may be assessed theologically and ecclesiologically nowadays, it is still incontestably true to say that it has exerted a considerable influence on the ecumenical movement in the broadest sense of the word. Volume I (pp.62-63) discusses the question of the extent to which the existence of the World Council of Churches may have directly influenced Pope John XXIII's initiative. The conclusion — I think rightly — is: not at all. But the image proffered of the WCC in this respect is, I believe, far too critical. The limits of conciliar practice in the context of the WCC are emphatically underlined: "Its various proceedings were not properly conciliar at all." Essentially, it is opined, the WCC is nothing more than a "religious non-governmental organization".

Of course that does not sum up the meaning of the ecumenical movement and of the WCC. These prepared the ground for the ecumenical dimension of the Council,

and the Roman Catholic side too should acknowledge this. Without the close relations that had developed among non-Catholic churches since the beginning of the century, the network of communications necessary for the success of the Second Vatican Council quite simply would not have existed. The — admittedly restricted — conciliar practice that had developed within the scope of the WCC since the second world war had led to approaches in understanding, and above all to common witness, in respect of major issues. Numerous topics that were treated at the Second Vatican Council had already been raised at the level of the WCC: the nature of the church and, in particular, the nature of church unity, scripture and tradition, and church and world. Is this similarity in the two agendas mere chance? Accordingly, I think that a history of the Council should have made at least some effort to explore the actual substance of the WCC's work in the 1950s and 1960s. The New Delhi assembly, for example, was significant for the Council not solely because of the participation of Roman Catholic observers, but because of the main points of its actual proceedings.

Finally, I think that the way in which the Council affected the non-Catholic world was based to a considerable extent on the pre-existing conciliar practice of the WCC. Volume II, p.627, rightly indicates that the proclamation of the Council evoked an unexpected response far beyond the bounds of the Roman Catholic Church. Christianity as a whole was transposed into a *stato di concilio*. This, I think, is true. Indeed, I would add that in some cases it affected non-Catholic circles even more than the Catholic Church itself. But would that have been possible without actual initiatives in conciliar practice already taken within the context of the WCC?

There can be no doubt that the WCC too was influenced by the Roman Catholic Church. Although officially absent as a participant, it was constantly present at WCC deliberations. Catholic theologians, for example, contributed indirectly to the formulation of the so-called Toronto declaration (1950). But the influence of the Roman Catholic Church is exaggerated when the extension of the Basis (1961) of the WCC is ascribed to the "preconciliar atmosphere" evoked by the announcement of the Council (I, p.387). On the other hand, the significance of the relations with the Russian Orthodox Church into which the WCC entered in the 1950s is underestimated. Without the Russian Orthodox Church's membership in the WCC, the Moscow patriarchate could never have sent observers to the Council.

But the WCC also directly helped the Roman Catholic Church in the preparations for the Council. General secretary W.A. Visser 't Hooft recognized the importance of the proclamation of the Council at a time when others were still uncertain about it. He must be commended for his involvement with the preparations for the Council not merely as a non-participant observer, but critically and constructively. His public statements and his confidential advice alike were appreciated. From the very start, for example, he emphasized the importance of a declaration on religious freedom. His recommendation was accepted and in the preparatory phase gave rise to one of the few major debates (I, p.296). He consistently referred to the need for an "address for non-Catholic churches in Rome". After the establishment of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, he was always available as a mediator. Several of Cardinal Bea's and Willebrands' contacts came about through the WCC. The meeting with Metropolitan Nikodim in Paris in August 1962, for instance, occurred at a session of the central committee.

The list could be extended. Visser 't Hooft was undoubtedly a critical spirit. He was always concerned to implement the ecumenical concept that lay behind the WCC. It is anachronistic to interpret his observations on the course of the preparatory work as a "lack of loyalty" to the Roman Catholic Church. Anyone who thought realistically at the time was necessarily sceptical! Roman Catholic colleagues visiting the WCC at that time did not paint an encouraging picture of things.

2. My second major point concerns the observers and their role. I think that there was more to it than is assumed in these two volumes. The authors do concede at various junctures that they were more than mere observers: that they were not extras, as it were, but active participants in the Council. Yet the picture of them in this account remains strangely colourless. The main thing about them which seems to interest the authors is their positive remarks about the conciliar proceedings (II, p.567). The observers were certainly pleasantly surprised by the Council. Undoubtedly, too, some observers did not think of doing anything beyond offering encouraging remarks. But most of them had more than this in mind. They were concerned both with how the proceedings might be influenced, and with what kind of results might emerge for the non-Catholic churches.

The appointment of observers was no straightforward matter for the WCC. There were critical voices, both from certain Protestant circles, and from the Orthodox side, which in 1962 were still not of one opinion about sending observers: the second observer should have been an Orthodox bishop; the Orthodox members of the central committee objected. I owed my own appointment to the fact that I occupied a relatively unimportant position. My commission was defined restrictively. Unofficially, however, Visser 't Hooft encouraged me to take every possible initiative. Consequently my presence in Rome was effected in the context of a constant dilemma between "two mandates", an official and an unofficial commission.

I shall cite a few examples. The observers not only engaged in numerous discussions. Even in the first session, some of us drafted interventions for certain bishops. In the debate on the liturgy, for example, I once heard my own words being read on the use of the vernacular and the need for translations of the Bible. Good relations with the Secretariat for Christian Unity made it possible to submit memoranda on certain topics. Even before the start of the Council, the WCC sent Bishop Willebrands a somewhat lengthy letter on prayer for unity, which was a question still unresolved at the time. During the Council I had the opportunity to meet regularly with a group of journalists, Jesuits from the circle around Roberto Tucci. They enabled me to open some doors that had previously been closed. The series of comments from the WCC side intensified in the intermediate session 1962-63. Memoranda on the texts up for discussion went to Bishop Willebrands and, at the request of Bishop Guano of Leghorn and by agreement with Bishop Willebrands, the WCC prepared a detailed commentary on the planned schema on the church and the world.

Another important event was a preparatory session for the fourth world conference on Faith and Order in Montreal (July 1963). The session was held in the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey. It was intended to give Catholic theologians, including Yves Congar, the opportunity to speak about the drafts for the Council. The results of this consultation were included in the second section on scripture and tradition, as well as elsewhere. When Oliver Tomkins described the fourth world conference as "promising chaos", he did not have the Catholic participants in mind but much more the

questioning of traditional ecclesiological viewpoints by radical thinkers such as Ernst Käsemann, Bill Stringfellow and others. And at the world conference the process of secularization played an important part for the first time in the context of Faith and Order.

Another important function of the observers was reporting. My letters not only provided information for the "head office" in Geneva,<sup>2</sup> but Visser 't Hooft sent parts of my reports to a whole range of church leaders. In this way, he hoped to prepare the ground for formation of a common opinion. Even during the first session, I also corresponded with the international Bible societies on the consequences of introducing the vernacular into widespread Roman Catholic practice.

3. A certain criticism of the WCC runs like a continuous thread through the account offered by these two volumes. The first volume represents Visser 't Hooft as over-sensitive in relation to the "Rhodes affair". Mistrust on the part of the WCC is often referred to at the end of the section on the first session. The WCC, we learn, was afraid that it would lose the initiative. It is accused of a competitive attitude (*alcuni veterani e pionieri rivendicano il diritto di primogenitura; altri, invece di celebrare fidanzamenti, manifestano un certo timore di concorrenza*, II, p.591). Fear of *emarginazione* (II, p.620) is supposed to have induced a certain pettiness. The word *nervosismo*, unknown to me before, is used several times (II, p.588).

These characterizations do not, I think, bring out the most important aspects of the issue. We must ask why there is a failure to see that from the start the fundamental question was how the Roman Catholic Church would fit into the ecumenical movement. Would it look on itself as the centre of the ecumenical movement, and try to pursue ecumenical relations without any consideration for the degree of community which had already been achieved? Or would there be an acceptance of initiatives *within the scope* of the ecumenical common witness already in evidence? The profound conviction of those responsible in Geneva was that a way had to be found of making dialogue and common action possible. From the beginning, therefore, they tried to ensure that this perspective would prevail. The developments of the last thirty years show how important this approach is. The ecumenical movement would probably have now reached a different point if this approach had been established more successfully.

Even in respect of the "Rhodes incident" this central question was the main issue. Would the Catholic church "make use of" the WCC as long as it served its purposes? Or would it acknowledge the vision that it represented? Admittedly Visser 't Hooft could react sharply, sometimes too sharply, but I almost never saw him do so without some good reason. In this case too he was concerned not merely with the prestige of the WCC, but with the question of what presuppositions were necessary to ensure a healthy development of common witness among the churches.

It seems to me that the considerations that emerged immediately after the first session are even more important. In the first months of 1963 I prepared a detailed memorandum on the new situation and sent it for an opinion to a number of important people: Edmund Schlink, Ernest Payne, Franklin Clark Fry, Hendrikus Berkhof, Eugene Carson Blake, Karl Barth and so on. It was concerned with the question of the path the WCC should follow to ensure a meaningful reception of the promising results of the first session. The question of the Catholic Church's membership of the WCC was already discussed in this memorandum. Thereafter the main subject was other



forms of cooperation. These points had their outcome later in the foundation of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC.

In my opinion these considerations have nothing to do with *nervosismo*. Rather, and much more so, they are evidence of responsible concern for the future of the ecumenical movement. They showed that a new situation had arisen which asked for new paths to be followed. When I think of those months before the second session, I recall an extremely intensive period of thought and planning, and I believe that there is still something to be learned from the intuitions evident after the first session.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Un disordine promettente*, II, pp.579ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Fouilloux, "Des observateurs non-catholiques", in *Vatican II commence: Approches francophones*, Leuven, 1993, p.236.