

Visions of lay Franciscan within the Church and around the world

in relation to the comprehensive course and the conciliar church image

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Let me say right at the beginning that I am not here as ambassador to the Holy see but as a simple lay person and as a person who is interested in history and as one of the people of God. I am 73 years old, I spent 70 years of my life in Latin America, in Indo-Afro-America, as I call it, and I closely watch the prevailing problems of the world and the Church.

I speak as a representative of the SFO and I benefit from the experiences of my present position. The renowned historian Arnold Toynbee once described the small Vatican State as a great spiritual and political observatory. From there, with a Franciscan heart, I would like to take a look at the challenges of the present.

This look can certainly also be fallible and might seem somewhat shocking to many. Nevertheless, we should keep with Aristotle, who was a friend of Plato and even more a friend of the truth, or with the teachings of Jesus: „The truth will set you free. “

Let me start by first of all paying tribute to Father Andreas. I have known him for many years and he is perhaps one of the few Germans or even Europeans that in all the many years has always demonstrated understanding, sensibility and generosity for the poor and the so-called developing world. This was of great importance to us, especially in the difficult times for Latin America. This is also part of my “taking a look”.

When attempting to draw a comprehensive picture of the present situation in the Church as well as in the world it is necessary to look into the past and I will therefore start with Vatican Council II.

Retrospective of Vatican Council II

We know that the Council came unexpectedly and to the surprise of many, that many did not agree and that they were worried. At the time there were many fruitful and powerful theological tendencies and also distinguished theologians that were also quite constricted in their respective field.

Just think of the liturgical movement. I remember our situation in Uruguay. At that time we celebrated the so-called “dialogue masses “using the common liturgy known in Germany, i. e. after Lection and Gospel have been recited in Latin, the priest also recited them in Spanish. A process began that also reached Rome and which could only be concluded because my Father was the bearer of the highest decoration by the Vatican and he had promised to stop celebrating this kind of mass in the future.

The works by Teilhard de Chardin also had to be read in the seminaries at night using flashlights; the print of the photocopies had been scaled down.

Or I also remember the difficulties that the Jerusalem Bible Institute with its excellent exegete Father Lagrange, had to suffer for many years. I remember the reprimands and the suspicions that renowned theologians had to endure that also played a decisive role during later on during the Council, as Rahner, Cheng, Schillebeeckx, de Lubac, who was appointed Cardinal later on and Congar, who was asked to keep silent by the so-called Congregation of the Holy Office.

I also remember the traumatic decision prohibiting the working priests to continue with their work.

But the positive facts also have to be recognized that made it through the filter of the close-mesh net of the Curia. I would like to mention the reintroduction of the Easter vigil on Saturday before Easter which had already been celebrated under Pius XII as well as similar initiatives as, e.g. the encyclical “Mediator dei“ and “Divino afflante spiritu“.

Let me come back to the Council. Nowadays it is an open secret within the Vatican that the election of Roncalli with the help of the Holy Spirit has been the strategic act of a "progressive" group of Cardinals who hinted that although they would elect a conservative Cardinal, but one that was not of the liking to the Roman Curia. They thought of electing Roncalli, a good personality who, however, was considered to be a harmless change-over Pope. They did not consider that Roncalli was a close friend of Cardinal Constantini. Who knows anything about him today?

We should briefly address him to satisfy history and also to better understand the upcoming issue.

Celso Costantini was extremely educated, polite, and even-tempered. After having performed several difficult Church duties Pope Pius XI appointed him as apostolic nuncio of China. He was able to provide great impetus to the Church there and he reorganized the local Church system with great respect to the cultural traditions. Later on he became Secretary of the Congregation „Propaganda fide“ and finally he was appointed Cardinal. All of this is told in his biography. However, the biography does not say is that he was a "very close friend" to Roncalli, as the Pope himself describes him in his diary, and that had great influence on him. It is also not told that as a young man Costantini had participated in the ecclesiastic renewal movements in the early 20th century and that he shared the ideas of Antonia Rosmini. The most impressive and today almost forgotten fact is that in 1939, in a document that has been clearly related today, he anticipated a Council and already formulates the issues that are fundamental for the vision and the reforms of Vatican Council II. All of this can unfortunately be found in a quite little-known book by Giuseppe Butturini: „The origins of Vatican Council II. A proposal by Celso Costantini“, published in 1988 by Concordia Sette.

In 1962 the Council was summoned by John XXIII. We all know of the difficulties during the elaboration of the texts that had to be studied. Thanks to John XXIII and Paul VI it was possible to work with the documents that had to be decided on during Vatican Council II. The working documents were approved by a great majority, and this was owed to – I am convinced of that – an exceptional "kairos" during which the Holy Spirit was present.

I believe that Vatican Council II with its valuable results should be regarded as the beginning and not as the highlight of a renewal movement. Presumably this is one of today's problems: it is known that after Vatican Council II there were those who tended to exaggerate and that there was disbelief. But this does in no way justify the proclamation of a standstill.

And exactly that is the point we should look at today. I am not referring to the followers of Lefèbre, but to the big circle that believes that the Council has had its peak and that it will not have to be continued or applied in practice. Under the pretext, that variations may occur, which I do not want to exclude, it was also said that „matters had to be assigned to their proper places again“. This means the propagation of the validity of the Council, it is quoted, but in the end it is crystallized. And just as a distortion of words took place in one case, there is also the tendency to recede behind the Council.

Why is this crystallization of the Council somewhat of a fallback? Following the energy that the Council had set free, the limited reflexes, the anxieties, the security mechanisms, the mechanisms with which the new measures of the Council are fought against cause a return to the routine of the old habits.

Vatican Council II has not been concluded

I am not of the opinion that the Council has been interrupted. I am convinced that the development kept moving. At the same time – as has often happened in history before – traditional theologian topics were addressed in more detail.

I myself I am traditionalist to the core. Still tradition does neither begin in the Middle Ages nor with the Mass by Pius V. Because I am a traditionalist, I receive the Communion into my hand

and kneeling, because believers did so until the VIII Century, and I am also in favor of the mass being held in the native language of each country, because this was the habit during the first centuries.

With this distinction we have to take a look at reality today, we should do so from inside the Church, in the spirit of prayer, bright and loving and filled with hope.

Just recently Father Antonio Rosmini has been canonized. 40 theses from his books had been banned, in my childhood it had been forbidden to read his books. The Holy Spirit always works...

Another example for power and hope are the small Christian communities in Brazil. It is important to live and pray within the Church community. Francis and Clare are our role models. If they could have been stopped by the not always ideal behavior by the Church at that time or if they had left the Church or if they had only lamented, there would be no Franciscan-Clarean Charism today. They were in a position to provide an alternative. To see reality is not equivalent to a breach with or avoidance of the Church. Let us also think about what Saint Anthony has said in his sermons, or about the criticism by Saint Catherine of Siena towards the Pope.

Let me come back to the Council. I am convinced that Vatican Council II has not been completed, and I am not referring to what it has taught, but to what has been put into practice. This obviously applies especially to laity, wonderful ideas can be found in the Council documents. But presently we as laypersons do not have the position we deserve and we are not even listened to.

The world as an area of Christian mission for laity

But in this case we should act on our own responsibility and get a hold of the position we are entitled to. We should simply be where the Council puts us. Just take a look at the wonderful statement „Christi fideles laici“ by John Paul II. Many of us laypeople will not even have read it, let alone tried to put it into practice.

As Franciscans we are especially called to further the role of laity within the Church and around the world. We should not forget that the Franciscan movement had initially been a lay movement and that the so-called Third Franciscan Order Secular was mainly borne by laity and became part of a religious order as Order of the Lesser Brothers. The poverty movements, which were very important in the Middle Ages, have been laity movements.

However, when speaking about the role of laity, it is apparent that their specific mission and their field of activity is the world as a whole.

It is certainly okay that laity fulfils certain tasks within the Church. The “Lumen gentium“ and the “Christifideles laici“ clearly state that *“The 'world' thus becomes the place and means for the lay faithful to fulfil their Christian vocation”* (...) Thus being-in- the- world and acting-in-the-world does not only constitute an anthropological and sociological situation for the lay but also and especially a specific and theologian and ecclesiastical one (...). God reveals his will to them and by their very vocation, to *“seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God.”*

Much to my dismay, I noticed that lately there has been a tendency to again “clericalize“ laity. The wonderful document by Aparecida does not give a clear statement on the role and the engagement of laity in the world. This issue would have deserved an own chapter. We are running into danger to turn into some sort of Minotaur – half clergy, half laity.

And yet a second remark on the tasks of Christian laity: I have great respect for His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI and I highly value his latest Encyclical *“Caritas in veritate”*. But in my opinion it lacks the explicit mention of the duties of Christian laity, especially as this is a social encyclical and it is our task to be global witnesses of love in genuine truth.

Presently there is mainly discussion about the dangers, the risks of heterodoxy and simultaneously we are asked to put the Council into practice. Theological laity would be needed to elaborate an individual spirituality. So far priests and bishops are doing this for us.

Our spirituality, surrounded by the world, is too weak to bear the social responsibility that we have as laity and we as Franciscan laity.

It is true that there is less poverty in the world, especially because China and India have been able to raise the living standards of its people. In Central and South America, the continent with the highest number of Catholics, there is still a vast diversity in the distribution of wealth. Many movements that have emerged in the last decades have been supported by a false spirituality favoring alienation and avoidance. In addition there is this religious movement, whose founder has written a spiritual text with 999 reflections which do not once mention the poor.

Given this situation it has to be one of the essential duties of a Franciscan to testify that the "option for the poor" is still alive, that it has not only been a temporary matter, but that the "option for the poor" is rather always relevant, because it originates from the centre of the Gospel, from the Holy Scriptures. This option is of historic and existential importance to us as Franciscans; it is a part of us.

Just recently I heard a comment by the President of the Pontifical Laternan University on the Encyclical "Caritas in veritate" by Benedict XVI. Considering all the erudition of the remarks, there was no mention of the poor and of the developing world. This caused me to utter to other diplomats after the lecture: "We have just heard the good news: the poor do not exist. Otherwise they would have been mentioned on such an occasion..!"

For this reason I call on the priests, on the Franciscan religious. Go ahead and further the engagement by the lay faithful, especially of the members of the Third Order Secular, regarding social and political action according to the Council documents and the Pontifical Letter „Christifideles laici": *"to participate in society by assuming in mission of service the defence and the promotion of justice"*. Sometimes the Brotherhoods appear to be Lay Brotherhoods of a Good Death and not like prayer groups that are in the world.

When I speak of communities, I remember an occurrence in Caracas. During a meeting a responsible of the Third Order Secular told me after his speech that he had deliberately avoided the term community and used the term brotherhood instead, because community was part of the communist-Marxist ideology. However, on the basis of the social encyclicals I was able to prove to him that the Popes also used the term community.

We Franciscans should know the social teachings of the Church. Listening to the Word of God, the Holy Communion, studies – at one's own capability – prayer, contemplation, charity, especially to the poor – these are all the basic experiences of the Franciscan brotherly-sisterly life in the world.

I would also like to emphasize how important it is to know the Franciscan charism in which the comprehensive course is of invaluable help. At that I am thinking of all those who contribute to this course We should by all means make use of this exceptional source of ideas to be able to grow in our authentic spirituality and to avoid that we resort to certain devious spiritualisms.

Yet another important aspect is to finally put an end to the opinion that theology can only be practiced in Europe. Maybe as a result part of the problems of theology of liberation had already been predetermined as it had originated in the periphery.

A high Prelate once told me that priests should come to Europe, especially to Rome, as they could study authentic theology there. These centers are the virtual cradle of wisdom – and I will add: of Roman wisdom. The cultural colonization is always the worst.

We Latin Americans could of course be mistaken and be corrected. This will do no damage to our South American theology. For example, let us think about the great delusion by St. Thomas Aquinas on the Immaculate Conception. – This delusion has in no way damaged his theology.

The colonialist conception of theology is a cause for concern given that sociological studies on Catholicism unanimously agree that the faith existence will be shifted even further into countries at the periphery and secularization or de-Christianization will be on the increase in Europe.

But let me once again come back to social engagement. At present almost one billion people in the world suffer from starvation. Six million children die from starvation each year and every four seconds a human being dies from hunger.

Last year the Director of the FAO (Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN) said here in Rome that the organization had planned to establish fund of 170 million Euros for poor countries, which would not include the developed countries to prevent an increase of food prices. However, they were not able to come up with even half of the intended amount. In a world that last year had spent 851 billion Euros on weapons, there are no funds to help the needy peoples.

I ask myself yet another question on developing countries: How shall we Franciscans handle the problems that are being created by the transnational laboratories? For example, a renowned international laboratory has paid 55 million dollars of compensation for the death of 11 children and the illness of another 180 people – caused by test-runs of drugs – in order to avoid a law suit. If they are willing to pay such a high amount as compensation how high would the amount be that they will gain based on their experiments in poor countries?

I am also thinking of the difficult problem of immigrants who are regarded as criminals in Europe. What is our opinion of this situation?

And I am also thinking of many other challenges for the Franciscans: pollution of the environment, fundamentalism, and globalization. Globalization - apart from its positive effects - also brings about exclusion and inequality, which is caused by the mighty.

In Latin America the grassroots movements with their particularly contradictory actions are searching for the unity of the continent, for the „great homeland” and for a fairer society. Sometimes we the Franciscan laity do our share by contributing our experiences and by trying to identify the favorable aspects in these movements.

The defense of human rights and the right for life from the time of conception are also two of the great challenges. We can definitely not cover all issues.

However, we should ponder on one very important issue: namely about the role of women in society and within the Church. There are several excellent documents by the Council and by the Magisterial. I am not speaking of the question of priesthood, but I am reflecting on what we are able to do in order for women to obtain their proper place and respect within society but principally also within the Church.

To be Jesus' witness to the world

Finally, please allow me to share a personal thought with you. We are celebrating the 800th Anniversary of the Franciscan movement. We should ask ourselves what our tasks are nowadays. There are many and valuable answers to this question. A common factor of all answers we could say: we should be Jesus' witness to the world.

This seems to be simple to me, but in reality this is not the case.

Nowadays we are tempted to restore Christianity, but it has already died. It is impossible to raise it from the dead again, to return to it. All the same many try to restore it. A philosopher and an exemplary Christian layman, Emmanuel Mounier, called Christianity with his subtle French humor “the faded one”. Christianity is dead but many of us have a hard time in issuing the death certificate.

In Europe and in the developed countries there is a clear tendency to lead a life without God. Hedonism and consumerism are the highest values.

We should be witness in the world, just as they first Christians in their heathen times. The original meaning of the term martyr is witness. With our "martyrdom" let us be light and salt in the world we live in. This is how the Christians were able to convert the heathens.

We have to testify in a prophetic way. Franciscan prophecy is a basic testimonial. Let us be "martyrs" with our way to live that is influenced by the Gospel. Just as St. Paul said: "Test everything. Hold onto the good." Francis has set an example with his testimonial in front of the sultan. Through their testimonials Francis and Clare have created an option. They live the utopia in the foresight of the Kingdom of God. That in reality is their most significant testimonial.