

Understanding the Controversial Synod of Bishops.

The 2015 Synod of Bishops in October is a mini version of Vatican II. The controversy surrounding religious freedom in the Church was settled in 1965, but the disagreements still abound.

Pope John XXIII, who is now a canonized saint, promoted a pastoral style of leadership, believing that the Church can best counteract errors by demonstrating the validity of her teaching through Christian charity: *“There is nothing more effective than charity, in eradicating the seeds of discord, nothing more efficacious in promoting concord, just peace, and the brotherly unity of all, than mercy and charity”* He went on to say, *“The Church in Council is like Peter who said to the beggar, ‘Silver and gold I have none; but what I have, that I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, arise and walk’”* (Acts 3:6).

Today, I hear Pope Francis adopting the same leadership style as Pope John did. Both were Christ figures.

Sixteen documents came out of the Second Vatican Council; all were under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and each one reflected Pope John’s pastoral approach to leadership.

The Declaration on Religious Freedom was hotly debated before it was passed overwhelmingly. That document was by far the most controversial and far reaching one of the Council. It had the blessing of Pope John XXIII all the way.

In 1965, the Church Fathers changed the views expressed in 1864 by Pope Pius IX in his Syllabus of Errors. He not only condemned religious freedom, but also a host of other modern trends, like the railroads.

The Church once demanded freedom for itself when it was in the minority, but refused to grant it to others when it was in the majority. Earlier popes did this on the principle that ‘error has no rights’.

Today under the direction of the Declaration on Religious Freedom, the Church puts great emphasis on the dignity of the human person. This means we must respect the sincere convictions of others, even if we disagree with them. No one should be subject to coercion of any kind when it comes to following his or her conscience.

The importance of the document on religious freedom, and the reason for the feverish controversy surrounding it in the early 1960’s, was that it demonstrated how Church tradition can develop and change with time. The Second Vatican Council taught that this change is only possible in our traditions, not in the Church’s solemn dogmas. For instance, the teaching that Jesus Christ is true God and true man will never change, but our understanding of the role of women in the Church is a tradition that is evolving. How far that change will go remains to be seen.

Ecumenism is another example of new thinking in the Church. After the Council Fathers settled the religious freedom issue they went on to debate the reunification of the Christian Churches. Jesus wanted unity, “That all may be one,” (John 17:20).

Hans Kung, in his book The Council and Reunion (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961, p.188) stated that the chief difficulty in the way of reunion of the Christian Churches lies in the two differing concepts of the Church.

One view sees the Church as an authoritative, absolute monarchy. The other understands authority to be a collegial service. After intense debate, the Council Fathers

chose to emphasize the latter view. Henceforth, the authority of the pope and bishops is to be seen as a service to be implemented in a collegial way. The 2015 Synod in Rome is working to achieve this ideal, not without controversy.

No one claims that the Church is a democracy, which would mean leadership by majority rules. The fact that the Pope is in charge of the outcome of this Synod has never been in doubt. Today we have Episcopal conferences to share in the episcopal world-wide collaboration (cf., the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, for more).

Some unenlightened Catholics have accused Pope Francis of creating discord by his leadership style and his outreach to all God's people, but he is doing exactly what Vatican Council II mandated.

Perhaps the most significant ecumenical change ordered by the Vatican Council II was in altering the very concept of reunification. Unity was no longer presented in terms of 'a return to Rome'. Now it is now viewed as a restoration of all things to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Other Christian communities are now regarded as real Churches within the Body of Christ, and all parties are now willing to take some blame for the disunity within the Mystical Body of Christ (cf., the Decree on Ecumenism). This admission was a major breakthrough. In later years, Pope John Paul II, who has also been canonized a saint, apologized publicly for the Church's part in the disunity of Christians.

Be at peace with the leadership style of Pope Francis, we are all in the hands of a good shepherd. The Synod of Bishops with all its controversy will in the end produce good fruit.