

Requestioning Vatican II By Edward P. Echlin

In 1995, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales produced a document, 'The Sign we Give' which said: 'The Second Vatican Council gave the Catholic Church a renewed and dynamic understanding of its nature and purpose. It presented the Church as a communion of life, love and truth and an instrument for the salvation of all; as the light of the world and the salt of the earth it is sent forth into the whole world.' In this year, which marks 45 years since the closure of Vatican II, eco-theologian Edward P. Echlin looks at the relevance of the Second Vatican Council to this National Justice and Peace Network conference that focuses on the issue of Food.

An important theologian at Vatican II, Jean Danielou, said that when meeting new challenges we 'requestion' our deep Catholic tradition. This conference confronts the challenge of food security, which was not an evident challenge at the time of Vatican II.

We requestion Vatican II for light in our approaching climate and food crisis, which has already begun among the most vulnerable people (and other sensate creatures). Vatican II was pre-eminently the Council of (and about) the Church. The central Constitution was about the Church, the 'Light of the Nations'. How can the Council guide and teach us about ourselves, and food security? Above all, our service of Jesus Christ and God's kingdom?

Briefly, the Council teaches that we, all God's people, *are* the Church. We are Christ existing as community today, which means in our food crisis. As we requestion the Council, therefore, we notice that all baptised people who are the Church, serve God and the earth-inclusive kingdom in solidarity, co-responsibility, and collegially. Those among us in holy orders help us rediscover and focus our faith; they minister by helping us form community – whether in house church, parish, or diocese, and in the universal Church.

The Council says the laity, those not ordained or vowed religious, 'since they have been incorporated into Christ by baptism, constitute the people of God and, in their own way made sharers in Christ's priestly, prophetic and royal office, play their own part in the mission of the whole Christian people in the church and in the world' (*LG* 4, 31). In a special decree on laity, the council again says: 'Teaching in the name of Christ, sanctifying and ruling, were conferred by him on the apostles and their successors. Laypeople, sharing in the priestly, prophetic and kingly offices of Christ, play their part in the mission of the whole people of God in the church and in the world' (*Decree on Laity*, 1, 2). It is misleading therefore to say that the Catholic Church has not responded to the ecological and food crisis. For baptised people around the earth have said and done much in service of God in his creatures, of which this conference is an admirable example.

When we 'requestion' the Council and our deep tradition we 'ascend to our roots'. We re-discover that we are a communion, a community of people including all who are baptised. The Church, as people of God, including clergy, religious and laity, is agrarian, related to the soil, its 'fields' and food. Jesus recognised this, that is why he taught with seeds, fields, sheep, fish, water and weather. He explicitly commended a person who 'leaves' home, family *and fields* to follow him. The soil, or family fields, for which we are responsible is as essential to people, as are family and home (*Mk. 10.29*).

The Council was influenced by the progress and infinite technological development myth of the 1960s (*GS, 3, 64*). Nevertheless, the Council taught respect, gratitude and care for other earth creatures. 'Redeemed by Christ and made a new creature in the Holy Spirit, humanity is able to love the things themselves created by God, and ought to do so. Humanity can receive them from God, and respect and reverence them as flowing constantly from the hand of God' (*GS, 3, 37*).

In brief, as the people of God, the light of the nations, all baptised persons, committed to the kingdom, testify in our lives that people are earth creatures, responsible for the earth and all its creatures. As God's people, lay and ordained and religious, we are responsible for the welfare of the land and its fertility. We are committed to food sufficiency for all people everywhere on earth, and to the welfare of all earth creatures. By agro-ecological lives, committed to food security and sufficiency for all, the Church is the sign of union with God, with all people and with the earth.

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