

POPE JOHN XXIII AND THE IDEA OF AN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

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On January 25, 1959, just three months after he had assumed the papacy, Pope John XXIII informed a group of Cardinals at St. Paul's outside the Walls that he intended to convoke an ecumenical council. The announcement appeared towards the end of a speech closing that year's celebration of the Chair of Unity Octave, which the Pope used in order to comment on his initial experiences as Pope and to meet the desire to know the main lines his pontificate would follow.¹ The first section offered what might be called a pastoral assessment of the challenges he faced both as Bishop of Rome and as supreme Pastor of the universal Church. The reference to his responsibilities as Bishop of Rome is already significant, given that this local episcopal role had been greatly eclipsed in recent centuries, most of the care for the city having been assigned to a Cardinal Vicar, while the pope focused on universal problems. Shortly after his election, Pope John had told Cardinal Tardini that he intended to be Pope "*quatenus episcopus Romae*, as Bishop of Rome." With regard to the city, the Pope noted all the changes that had taken place since in the forty years since he had worked there as a young priest. He noted the great growth in the size and population of Rome and the new challenges it placed on those responsible for its spiritual well-being.

Turning to the worldwide situation, the Pope briefly noted that there was much to be joyful about. But the larger part of his description is rather negative: human freedom being abused and compromised, people ignorant of the transcendent (perhaps a reference to Communism) or rejecting Christ for the pursuit of material goods (perhaps a reference to western consumerism). This is the latest contest, orchestrated by Satan, between St. Augustine's two cities. Melloni is correct in pointing out that this analysis differs from some emphases of Pius XII in that it gave a theological rather than a geographical (East vs. West) analysis of the contemporary struggle. To this perennial religious struggle, the Pope then added a further risk, represented by modern technological progress, in itself a good thing, which was weakening the energies of the spirit, relaxing the ancient order of society, and thus assisting the spread of the errors which divide humanity and lead to its spiritual and moral decay.

Peter Hebblethwaite finds this language uncharacteristic of Pope John and suggests that he was adopting it because he knew it was what the Cardinals wanted to hear, a "little ruse" that "was not a matter of duplicity but of psychology."² Against this view, however, is Hebblethwaite's own description of the Pope's first Encyclical as "negative in tone, firmly anti-Communist, full of dire warnings about the mass-media, and it demanded obedience from all."³ And Giuseppe Ruggieri is

¹ See Alberto Melloni, "'Questa festiva ricorrenza' (25 gennaio 1959): Prodomi e preparazione del discorso di annuncio del Vaticano II," *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa* 28 (1992) 607-43.

² Peter Hebblethwaite, *Pope John XXIII: Shepherd of the Modern World* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 320-21. Compare, however, his comment later on the Pope's praise for the work of the preparatory commissions: "True, it would have been bad public relations to tell them that they had been wasting their time. But was he really capable of saying one thing while thinking another? The word for that is hypocrisy" (p. 403; see also how he interprets *Veterum sapientia*, p. 405, and the Pope's description of the "inspiration" of the idea of the Council, p. 316-17).

³ Hebblethwaite, 332.

surely correct in pointing out that such negative descriptions of the contemporary situation were by no means rare in Pope John's speeches--so that he should not be considered, as he often is, a "naive optimist"--but that he departed from what has been called "Catholic catastrophism" by his insistence that Christ had not abandoned the world but was still powerfully active in it and by his refusal to consider nostalgic restoration an appropriate response to the challenges of the modern world.⁴

Similarly, in this very speech, the evocation of the challenges facing him led the Pope to decide to evoke "certain ancient forms" which the Church had used to affirm doctrine and to provide for Church discipline in ages of renewal. He would hold a diocesan synod for Rome and an ecumenical council for the universal Church. These would have among their results the up-dating of the Code of Canon Law.

The Pope ended by reserving to himself the communication of this announcement to the absent Cardinals, by asking them all for their attitude towards his decision and for their suggestions for these three projects, and by expressing his trust in the prayers of the Blessed Mother and the saints for the success of his proposals. It was only at the end that he mentioned "a renewed invitation to the faithful of the separated communities also lovingly to follow us in this search for unity and grace, to which so many souls all over the earth aspire."⁵

The Origin of the Idea of a Council

⁴ Giuseppe Ruggieri, "Appunti per una teologia in Papa Roncalli," in *Papa Giovanni*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo (Bari: Laterza, 1987), 246-71, especially 259-64, on "Faith and History."

⁵ According to several authors, this last clause read in Pope John's original text: "a loving and renewed invitation to our brothers in the separated Churches to share with us in this banquet of grace and brotherhood, to which so many souls all over the earth aspire" (see Giovanni Caprile, *Il Concilio Vaticano II*, I/1, 50n, citing the Pope's secretary, Loris Capovilla, "Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II segno dei tempi," *Il Simbolo*, 23 (1966) 215; Giancarlo Zizola, *The Utopia of Pope John XXIII* [Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978], 239-40; Hebblethwaite, 321- 22; Giuseppe Alberigo, "Giovanni XXIII e il Vaticano II," in *Papa Giovanni*, ed. G. Alberigo [Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1987] 216). The alleged alteration of this text may not be unrelated to a controversy over the following comments attributed to the Pope four days later, when he was speaking to the clergy of Rome: "The Pope said that he was not unaware of the difficulties in the way of implementing this program, also because it will be extremely difficult, he observed, to restore harmony and reconciliation among the different Churches which, separated too long, often are afflicted with internal dissension. The Pope intends to tell them to put an end to the discord and to come together without a minute historical trial to see who was wrong and who right. All parties could be responsible. Thus the Pope intends simply to say: 'Let us reunite.' John XXIII then asked us to notice the undeniable fact that after the separation the Catholic Church became stronger and more united, which means that it possesses the truth." Shortly after this report of the words of a priest in the Pope's audience was spread, the Vatican denied it; and these words do not appear in the released text of this speech. For this incident see, Caprile, *Il Concilio Vaticano II*, I/1, 107n, and Gian Franco Svidercoschi, *Storia del Concilio* (Milano: Ed. Ancora, 1967), 39.

The question arises naturally of how the Pope came to the idea of holding a council.⁶ We have already seen, in the discussions held under his two predecessors, that the idea of an ecumenical council had been raised in several contexts throughout the twentieth century. At the present stage of research, it is difficult to know how much knowledge Roncalli had of these various proposals or projects. During the discussions held under Pius XI, he was in Rome as Italian president of the Opera per la Propagazione della Fede, but no documentation now proves that he knew of the work being done. He was an old friend of Celso Costantini, who in 1939 prepared a project of a Council; but once again there is no proof that he was aware of it. And the same judgment must be made about the official discussions that took place under Pius XII.

Things are not much more certain when it comes to less official calls for a Council. As we have seen, in May and June of 1958, Giacinto Scaltriti proposed a Council to deal with the world crisis in a journal for the Italian clergy, *Palestra del Clero*, which Roncalli could certainly have seen.⁷ Olivier Rousseau's comment to this effect is all the more interesting when one recalls that there is some evidence that his pioneering confrère, Lambert Beauduin, had long entertained the idea of a new council and spoken of it with Angelo Roncalli. According to Sonya A. Quitslund, "for fifty years [Beauduin] had maintained that a new council to complete the work of Vatican I was the only feasible solution to handle the crises of the modern era effectively. By the 1920's the conviction was clearly formulated, and he tried to have a chair on the creeds and councils established at Sant' Anselmo as a remote preparation for the council."⁸

Beauduin had been a friend of Roncalli for many years, and there is one report that "during their frequent private evenings together in Paris, when the future pope was nuntio to France, the two of them fantacized [sic] about the need and possibility of another ecumenical council."⁹ Finally, Louis Bouyer reports that on the day that Pius XII died, Beauduin remarked, "If they elect Roncalli, everything will be saved. He will be able to convoke a council, and he will consecrate ecumenism."¹⁰

Roncalli's years as apostolic delegate in Bulgaria and in Turkey may have permitted him to learn about the discussions of a Council that were held in Orthodox circles earlier in the century. In fact in his Christmas message of December 23, 1958, in which he spoke about Christian unity, he recalled these efforts:

We still have a vivid memory of some decades ago, when some representatives of the Orthodox Churches--as they are called--in the Near East, with the practical cooperation of some governments, gave thought to a concentration

⁶ See G. Caprile, "Come nacque in Giovanni XXIII l'idea del Concilio," I/1, 39-45. G. Alberigo has recently tried to uncover pastoral experiences of Roncalli that might have helped incubate the idea of a Council: "L'ispirazione di un Concilio ecumenico: le esperienze del Cardinale Roncalli," in *Le deuxième Concile du Vatican* (Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 1988), 81-99.

⁷ Olivier Rousseau, "Le prochain Concile et l'Unité de l'Eglise," *Irenikon*, 32 (1959), 309-33, at 309-310.

⁸ Sonya A. Quitslund, *Beauduin, A Prophet Vindicated* (New York: Newman Press, 1973), 228-29.

⁹ The remark is made by Thomas F. Stransky in the Foreword to Quitslund's book, viii.

¹⁰ Louis Bouyer, *Dom Lambert Beauduin: Un homme d'Eglise* (Paris: Casterman, 1964), 181. Later Beauduin added: "I'm confident we have another chance. The Cardinals, most of them, don't know with whom they're dealing. They're capable of voting for him."

of civil nations, beginning it with an understanding among various Christian confessions of different rites and different histories. More pressing interests and nationalistic concerns combined to render these intentions barren, but they remain worthy of respect any time they tend towards the unity of all Christians under the one Shepherd, the Vicar of Christ.¹¹

Finally, Roncalli certainly knew his Church history and in fact had devoted a good number of years to the study of St. Charles Borromeo and his attempts to implement the Council of Trent. He knew well, then, what he was talking about when he referred to the councils as instruments for the renewal of the Church.

When Pope John himself spoke of the origin of the idea of the Council, however, he regularly referred to it as a sudden and divine inspiration, spontaneous in character. "The idea of the Council did not mature as the fruit of a prolonged reflection, but like a spontaneous flower of an unexpected spring."¹² The longest explanation in this sense occurs in a speech the Pope gave to Venetian pilgrims on May 8, 1962, in which he uses the idea as an example of an intimation of the divine will:

Where did the idea of the Ecumenical Council come from? How did it develop? In a way that, to tell it, seems unlikely, so unexpected was the thought of this possibility and, of course, applying and fulfilling it. A question was raised in a meeting I had with the Secretary of State, Cardinal Tardini, which led on to a discussion about the way the world had been plunged into so many grave anxieties and troubles. Among other things we noted that though everyone said they wanted peace and harmony, conflicts unfortunately were growing more acute and threats being multiplied. What should the Church do? Should Christ's mystical barque simply drift along, tossed this way and that by the ebb and flow of the tides? Or is she not instead expected not simply to issue a new warning, but to offer also the light of a great example? What could that light be?

My interlocutor listened with reverence and attention. Suddenly, my soul was illumined by a great idea which came precisely at that moment and which I welcomed with ineffable confidence in the divine Teacher. And there sprang to my lips a word that was solemn and committing. My voice uttered it for the first time: "A Council!"¹³

The association of the inspiration with this meeting with Cardinal Tardini is echoed in a journal entry which Pope John made on September 15, 1962 during his pre-conciliar retreat:

Second grace. To have been able to accept as simple and capable of being immediately put into effect certain ideas which were not in the least complex, indeed perfectly simple, but far-reaching in importance and in responsibility

¹¹ *DMC*, I, 102-103.

¹² *DMC*, I, 709; for similar remarks, see I, 902; II, 578, 653; III, 328; IV, 606, 870; V, 313; many of these texts may be found in Caprile, I/1, 44-45.

¹³ *DMC*, IV, 258. Something of the nature of the Pope's conversation with Tardini may be intimated in an address to the diocesan directors of Italian Catholic Action, August 3, 1959: "The Holy Father had accepted the invitation to conclude the annual Octave of Prayer for the unity of the Church in St. Paul's Basilica last January 25th. Now in those days thoughts turn insistently to the objective of such prayer: the *unum sint* of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the sigh, the cry of the Redeemer who had already exclaimed: "*Levate oculos vestros et videte regiones, quia albae sunt jam ad messem*" (Jn 4:35). Peter is always ready to keep faith with his mission, with a view to the new possibilities which the material resources of human progress present for the benefit of the spiritual order.

"In our day there are many meetings of politicians, diplomats, scientists, industrialists, of people belonging to various commercial and professional categories. Some of them, unfortunately, do not take place under the name and banner of Christ; indeed, some of them are dominated by the force and power of the *Prince of this world*, who opposes Christ. Why not gather together those who agree on exalting the most memorable fact in human history, the victory of civilization in the light of Christ?" (*DMC*, I, 709-10).

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for the future, and with immediate success. What expressions are these: that one must accept the Lord's good inspirations, simply and confidently.

Without having thought about it beforehand, I put forward in one of my first conversations with my Secretary of State, on January 20, 1959, the idea of an Ecumenical Council, a diocesan Synod, and the revision of the Code of Canon Law, all of this being quite contrary to any previous supposition or imagination of my own on this subject. I was the first to be surprised at my proposal, without anyone having given me any indication of it.¹⁴

There is considerable evidence, however, that these descriptions given by Pope John himself greatly oversimplify the origin of the idea of the Council. First, there is some indication that the possibility of a Council was discussed during the conclave at which Roncalli was elected. In his memoirs Cardinal Frings wrote:

As I was returning home in the summer of 1958 from the Conclave in which John XXIII was elected pope, on the way I said to my secretary--it was Chaplain Schoeller who was taking the place of my own secretary, Hubert Luthe, during the time of his doctoral examination: "I have the feeling that a general Council will take place soon." I came to that view because around a hundred years had passed since the Vatican Council, but also because both Pius XI and Pius XII had quite powerfully exercised the papal magisterium and I thought that it was high time that the bishops also be able to raise their voices again.¹⁵

Cardinals Ottaviani and Ruffini claimed that they had spoken to Roncalli about a Council during the conclave. In 1968, Cardinal Ottaviani gave this account in response to an interviewer's question about his reaction to the announcement of the Council:

He had spoken to me about it from the moment of his election. Indeed, to be more exact, it was I who went to him in his Conclave cell, on the eve of his election. Among other things I said to him, "Your Eminence, we have to think about a Council. Cardinal Ruffini, who was present for the conversation, was of the same opinion. Cardinal Roncalli made this idea his own and was later to say: "I have been thinking about the Council since the moment I became Pope." It's true, he accepted our suggestion.¹⁶

¹⁴ Pope John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, revised edition (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1980), 349, translation slightly altered.

¹⁵ Josef Kardinal Frings, *Für die Menschen Bestellt. Erinnerungen des Alterzbischofs von Köln* (Köln: J.P. Bachem, 1973), 247.

¹⁶ Caprile, V, 702. Ottaviani repeated the claim in an interview with Bernard Bonnot: "Many cardinals visited Roncalli's small cell that night, among them Ottaviani and Ruffini, leaders of the Curial Conservatives. Like others, they saw that Roncalli would be elected. Among the things they discussed was 'what a beautiful thing' (*che bella cosa*) it would be to call a council. The purpose of their council would be to correct the errors rampant in the both Church and world;" Bonnot, *Pope John XIII: An Astute, Pastoral Leader* (New York: Alba House, 1968), 13. Hebblethwaite (283 and 306) accepts this view and quotes a letter to him from Msgr. Capovilla: "I do not find it hard to believe that Cardinal Ruffini had talked about a council to Pope John, either directly or indirectly. But the fact remains that Pope John always said he made his decision in perfect freedom, and 'without anyone having previously talked to him about the matter.'" Emilio Cavaterra, *Il prefetto del Sant'Offizio: Le opere e i giorni del cardinale Ottaviani* (Milano: Mursio, 1990), 3-6, maintains, unfortunately without providing documentation, that Ottaviani had urged the election of Roncalli at a meeting on October 25th and repeats the claims of Ottaviani and Ruffini with regard to the idea of a council.

Ruffini wrote to Pope Paul VI in 1964: "I have warmly supported the opening of the Council for thirty years, speaking about it already with Pius XII of sacred memory and then with John XXIII the very day of his election."¹⁷

During the Council, a Roman observer claimed that the new Pope found among the papers of Pius XII on his desk a reference to the calling of an ecumenical council.¹⁸ The Pope's private secretary, Msgr. Capovilla, reports that on October 30, 1958, two days after his election, "for the first time he hints in a conversation at the need to celebrate an ecumenical Council."¹⁹ On November 2, after an audience with Cardinal Ruffini, the Pope made a note about a Council.²⁰ He continued to talk about it with various figures throughout that month, and in December and January the Pope undertook a study of the history of Vatican I.²¹ He appears to have made his decision firm in the early days of the new year. On January 9, 1959, he told Don Giovanni Rossi, "Last night I had the great idea of holding a council."²²

He had not yet, however, spoken of it to his Secretary of State, Cardinal Tardini. All of his consultations to this point were private and confidential. It was a step of a different character for the Pope to speak of it with Tardini. He appears to have approached the conversation with some trepidation,²³ which may help to explain why he made so much of the conversation in later comments.

¹⁷ Letter of August 20, 1964, in Francesco M. Stabile, "Il Cardinal Ruffini e il Vaticano II: Le lettere di un 'intransigente,'" *Cristianesimo nella Storia*, 11 (1990), 134. Pietro Palazzini confirms Ruffini's part, and Pope John's own memorandum of November 2, 1958 indicates that he had spoken about a Council with Ruffini (see Caprile, V, 560n).

¹⁸ See Vincent A. Yzermans, *A New Pentecost: Vatican Council II: Session I* (Westminster: Newman Press, 1963), 297-98; unfortunately, this source turns out to be Malachi Martin, who is not necessarily to be trusted. It should be noted that on October 15, 1958, Roncalli visited his old friend, Cardinal Costantini, in the hospital. According to Ruggero Simonato, "Il carteggio tra A.G. Roncalli e C. Costantini (1936-1956)," *Cristianesimo nella Storia*, 7 [1986], 515-52, at 516n., relying on the testimony of the future pope's secretary, the two men did not discuss a council (note, however, that Capovilla says that he was not present for the whole conversation). Costantini is said to have told Roncalli: "You'd have to be ten years younger." Giuseppe Butterini, "Per un concilio di riforma: una proposta inedita (1939) di Celso Costantini," *Cristianesimo nella Storia*, 7 (1986), 87-139, at 94-95, argues that Pope John saw a copy of Costantini's *pro-memoria* for the first time only in May of 1959, but, while he seems to exclude any influence of Costantini on Pope John's decision to call a council, he believes there are points of similarity between the *pro-memoria* and the Pope's opening address to the Council.

¹⁹ Loris Capovilla, *Giovanni XXIII: Quindici Letture* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1970), 746. I take this to mean a conversation with Capovilla, his secretary.

²⁰ See Loris Capovilla, *Giovanni XXIII: Quindici Letture*, 746 and 267; "Reflections on the Twentieth Anniversary," in *Vatican II Revisited by Those Who Were There*, ed. Alberic Stacpoole (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1986), 106-28 at 116, where he also recalls his own initially unenthusiastic reaction.

²¹ Caprile, I/1, 40; Hebblethwaite, 308-309. There are passages in which Pope John speaks of the idea as having been present "from the first days of our pontificate:" see *Superno Dei nutu*, June 5, 1960, *Council Daybook*, I, 4; *Humanae salutis*, December 25, 1961, *DMC*, IV, 870 (Caprile, I/1, 259).

²² Hebblethwaite, 312.

²³ See the account of A. Samoré in Caprile, I/1, 44n: "As the first anniversary of the death of the Cardinal approached, the Pope one day revealed in confidence that he had given the Secretary of State the very first

The Pope met with Tardini on January 20, 1959. At his 7:00 Mass that morning he revealed that "in the Mass just celebrated he had formulated some special intentions concerning the completion of the third month of his Pontificate," and that same afternoon he asked support "for special intention of his during this Octave for Unity,...which will this year have a new and solemn epilogue on Sunday, the 25th, the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, at the papal chapel in the Basilica Ostiense."²⁴

The meeting with Tardini took place between 9:30 and 10:30. The Pope had already begun to work on the speech he would give five days later at St. Paul's. Each of the men left notes on the conversation.

Tardini: Important audience. Yesterday afternoon his Holiness reflected and meditated on a program for his pontificate. He has thought of three things: a Roman Synod, an Ecumenical Council, updating the Code of Canon Law. He wants to announce these three things to the Cardinals after the ceremony at St. Paul's next Sunday. I said to the Holy Father (who asked me) "I like things beautiful and new. And these three points are very beautiful and this way of announcing them to the Cardinals is new (but linked with ancient papal traditions) and most appropriate."²⁵

Pope John: In conversation with Tardini, Secretary of State, I wanted to test his reaction to my idea of proposing the project of an Ecumenical Council to the members of the Sacred College when they met at St. Paul's on the 25th of this month for the conclusion of the week of prayer. The Council would meet in due time when everything had been thought through. It would involve all Catholic Bishops of every rite and from every part of the world. I was rather hesitant and uncertain. His immediate response was the most gratifying surprise that I could have expected: "Oh, that really is an idea, an enlightening and holy idea. It comes straight from heaven, Holy Father. You will have to work on it, develop it, and publicize it. It will be a great blessing for the whole world."

I didn't need anything more. I was happy. I thanked the Lord for my idea which now received its first seal of approval here below--a pledge of that divine blessing which I was humbly confident would not be lacking.²⁶

From these accounts it is clear that the Pope was not really asking Tardini's advice about a Council but informing him of an intention already decided upon. He surely knew also, however, that if Tardini was strongly opposed to the idea, it would be difficult to carry it through. Hence the Pope's relief and joy that the Secretary of State accepted the idea:

To tell the truth, at first we were afraid that we might have puzzled or even dismayed him. Surely now we would have to listen to a first list of serious difficulties, if only because this unexpected announcement would naturally make one think of the long preparation such a project must entail. But, to the contrary, the response came at once. A manifest emotion came over the face of the Cardinal: his agreement was immediate and enthusiastic.

announcement of his idea of convoking the Council, and that he had done it with some hesitation. He knew the man's spiritual and intellectual powers, as well as his honesty and frankness. How would he react? Would he be favorable or opposed? And he was happily surprised at his immediate response of complete agreement." The Pope's uneasiness at informing Tardini is confirmed by Cardinal Felici, *Le Concile Vatican II* (Paris: Apostolat des Editions, 1966), 64.

²⁴ *DMC*, I, 749.

²⁵ Hebblethwaite, 314, but I have modified the translation after the original Italian given in Capovilla, *Giovanni XXIII*, 265, and a photostat of the diary entry published in *Villa Nazareth*, July, 1964. Later, Hebblethwaite, 316, notes that there are probably other remarks by Tardini not yet published.

²⁶ Hebblethwaite, 314-15.

A first sure sign of the Lord's will. Everyone knows the necessary and careful consideration with which the Roman Curia is accustomed to examine the questions, major and minor, which are submitted to it. Nevertheless, the *ecce adsum* of the Pope found an immediate echo in his closest collaborators.²⁷

The relationship between the idea of the Council and that of the Roman Synod is somewhat controverted. In the Pope's account of the meeting with Tardini, no mention is made of the Synod, while Tardini's account mentions all three of the projects which the Pope would announce on January 25th. In a second-hand account of the meeting, the Pope is quoted as saying that it was the day after that the idea of the Roman Synod was proposed to the Pope by Msgr. dell'Acqua, substitute of the Secretary of the State: "The Council, that's good for the universal Church; but a Synod is needed for the Church of Rome."²⁸ It is presumably to this conversation that the Pope himself alluded when addressing the opening session of the Roman Synod on January 24, 1960:

Let Us tell you, venerable brothers and beloved sons, something which We have revealed only to a few people and as a religious secret. When in our humble prayer, the Lord made sprout in the intimate simplicity of Our heart the idea of an Ecumenical Council, and We modestly spoke of it with someone, an emotional voice suggested to Us: "Holy Father! An Ecumenical Council is a beautiful idea, but why not think above all of the immediate needs of Rome, by preparing a diocesan Synod for the city which is the center of Christendom and which in the half-century since 1900 has grown in population from 400,000 inhabitants to more than two million, according to the most recent statistics?"²⁹

Some commentators have read into this suggestion of a Roman Synod an attempt on the part of some Curial figures to distract the Pope from the idea of the Council.³⁰ If there is any truth to this, the Pope's linking the two disproportionately important projects may have been an effort at conciliation, a concession made in order to guarantee Curial cooperation with the Pope's main concern, the Council.

More recently another account of the Pope's description of the origin of the idea of the Church has come to light, in the notes which Fr. Lombardi made about an audience with John XXIII

⁰ *DMC*, IV, 258-59. On the first anniversary of Tardini's death, Pope John again referred to "the first communication we made to him on the morning of January 23 [a mistake for 20], 1959--speaking familiarly to him before to anyone else--of the proposal to celebrate an ecumenical council as the new Pontiff's response to the whole world's expectations with regard to the complex movements of the modern age. A Council! Oh, this is a great idea which deserves the highest degree of collaboration for the prosperity of the Catholic Church throughout the world! He was the first, then, to welcome with heartfelt enthusiasm this great project, and the first to offer his generous cooperation - restrained and modest as it was externally, it was no less strong in substance - for its success" (*DMC*, IV, 441). And a month before the Council opened, he again spoke of this meeting as "the first origin of the solemn undertaking," the moment when from the Pope's heart, "by manifest inspiration of the Most High, but in an unexpected and simple way, there leapt to his lips the great word: A Council!" (*DMC*, IV, 730).

²⁸ This is from the account of Archbishop de Bazelaire of Chambéry, first given in *La Quinzaine religieuse de la Savoie*, March 15, 1961; published in part in *DC*, 58 (1961) 432.

²⁹ *DMC*, II, 128. See also Felici's account in Hebblethwaite, 313.

³⁰ See G. Caprile, "Ancora su Giovanni XXIII," *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 131/2 (1980) 49-54, at 53, where Msgr. Michele Maccarrone is quoted as criticizing the Alberigos for reading into this suggestion a desire to sabotage the Council. He goes on to say that the Curia was not enthusiastic over the Roman Synod, maintaining that it should follow not precede the Council and that the Pope insisted on it and followed its work very closely and with great satisfaction. The suggestion that the Council precede the Synod was also made by Cardinal Tappouni; see *ADA*, I, 147.

on December 23, 1961. This account is interesting because it refers to all three of the projects the Pope announced on January 25, 1959, and also because it again illustrates the way John used the incident to drive home spiritual lessons:

I really hadn't thought about it before. But I had to go to St. Paul's Basilica, and many Cardinals wanted to go there too. I thought about saying something to them. It was easy to improvise a little talk for the people. I took counsel with Tardini. Tardini's character was quite different from mine. But we were two honest men, and I had told him that I wouldn't do anything without talking to him first and that he shouldn't do anything without talking to me. Thus we got along, and the Lord's Spirit was with us.

Talking to Tardini, it came to me to tell him that I was thinking of talking to the Cardinals about unity, the unity of the children of God, and also unity with non-Catholics, and that something had to be done in the Church, just as everybody is doing now with their assemblies. For example: a Council. And while I was saying it, I thought to myself that the Cardinal would immediately say no.

You know, Father, Cardinal Tardini was *bruttarello*. He was so serious. But instead, when he heard the word "Council," his eyes widened and he said, "Right, right! We need a Council!" Then in came Don Dell'Acqua, who had been my secretary at Istanbul, so that I knew him well. I could tell that Cardinal Tardini had said something to him because I had hardly referred to the Council when he said to me immediately: "The Council is a great project, but here in Rome what we need first is a synod." I hadn't talked about that with anyone. Dell'Acqua was the first one to talk about a Roman synod. And right away I remembered the synod of Radini Tedeschi at Bergamo and the one I had held at Venice. That's how the second idea came, after the idea of the Council. Finally, someone else came and told me that the laws of the Church were all in need of review. Do you understand, Father? That's how the three ideas came that I announced at St. Paul's: of the Council, the synod, and the revision of the Code.

The Pope then drew the spiritual lesson: "A docile soul is like a vase into which God pours inspirations, making use of many people. When we are open to receive, the Lord speaks through any person he chooses."³¹

After a review of all the information available about the origin of the idea of a Council, what may we conclude? First, two of the accounts which the Pope gave of the inspiration - his address of May 8, 1962 and his journal-entry on the eve of the Council - cannot be accepted as they stand. We now know that the Pope had been thinking about a Council from the first days of his pontificate and that the idea had been, if not suggested to him, at least supported by other important figures, such as Cardinals Ottaviani and Ruffini. When he conversed with Tardini, then, he had the idea already in mind and indeed had begun the writing of the speech in which he would announce it.

The Pope's secretary offers this explanation. In saying that he had not thought about it before the meeting with Tardini, the Pope was referring to the period before his election. The conversations he had had with others before speaking to Tardini were looking for support and for prayers in order to decide to speak about it officially, "after becoming convinced that it was not a passing fancy or a spectacular surprise, but an inspiration which obliged him, as always, to submit to the will of God."³²

Hebblethwaite attempts to explain the discrepancies by speaking of the Pope's "wholly unconscious editing of his memories" and of his having transformed "the *most decisive moment*," his

³¹ Giancarlo Zizola, *Il microfono di Dio: Pio XII, padre Lombardi e i cattolici italiani* (Milano: Mondadori, 1990), 444-45.

³² Capovilla, *Giovanni XXIII*, 266, and "Reflections," 128, n. 14.

meeting with Tardini, "into the *moment of decision*" itself. "One can only conclude that John's memory faltered and that his unconscious editing of his reminiscences is designed to emphasize, yet again, that the idea of the Council was an 'inspiration' in the sense defined above" - that is, as "an irrevocable statement, self-committing language from which there was no retreat."³³

I am not wholly convinced by this explanation, and I wonder whether it is not necessary to consider (1) that it is not at all uncommon for religious figures, perhaps especially those in authority, to try to enhance the authority of their proposals by covering their down-to-earth, practical wisdom with a mantle of an immediate divine origin, (2) that the Pope on at least two occasions recalled the incidents primarily in order to drive home spiritual lessons, and not to satisfy critical historians, (3) whether this might not be also a manoeuvre on the part of the Pope to declare his independence from people like Ottaviani and Ruffini, whose idea of the purpose of a Council he knew to be quite different from his own, and (4) whether claiming divine inspiration might not also be a way of avoiding the impression that his calling of the Council was part of an "arrangement" made during the Conclave at which he was elected. All these, of course, are only hypotheses.

At times one has the feeling that certain defenders of Pope John believe it necessary to deny any influence of other people on his decision to convoke the Council in order to stress the unique prophetic character of the Pope's vision. In a sense, the loneliness of the Pope's decision takes the place of its direct divine inspiration. About this tendency three things should be said. First, there is no doubt that, as events were to show, the Pope's mature vision of what the Council should be certainly differed from what some of those who proposed it to him, especially Ottaviani and Ruffini, had in mind. It is quite legitimate, then, to make a close substantive comparison of John's idea of the Council and the ideas entertained by others who had spoken of the need for a Council. But, secondly, it is not at all clear that Pope John himself had a clear and complete vision of the Council's purpose at the moment when he announced it. For the first several months at least after the announcement, his references to the Council's purpose were at best vague. There is no reason to doubt that his own idea of what the Council might accomplish itself matured during the nearly three years between the announcement and the opening of the Council. And thirdly, it is perhaps this ability to let the idea of the Council mature that shows the real merit of Pope John XXIII. Roncalli was a man with a deep historical consciousness, and Alberigo is surely correct in locating in this aspect of his mental furniture the real origins of the Pope's decision. As he explained both in the speech in which he announced the Council and in the address with which he opened it in October, 1962, history had amply demonstrated the peculiar fruitfulness of councils for the renewal of the Church. To this sense of history he also joined a sense of new historical opportunities for the Church. He was not content with a merely negative assessment of the contemporary world and he showed no patience for attempts to restore a nostalgically romanticized past. It was this combination of historical awareness and of a conviction of the need to embrace new challenges and opportunities that was to mark the whole pontificate of John XXIII and to lead him in the course of the Council's preparation and first session

³³ Hebblethwaite, 315-18.

to make the decisions that enabled it to live up to the hopes he set in it when he first announced the Council. Alberigo puts it well:

Can one say that Roncalli the Patriarch of Venice presented himself at the Conclave with the Council in his pocket, as a project already clear towards which he was pointing? Since the sources are silent, one can only presume that he had a mature and deep conviction of the needs, of the prospects, and of the rhythms of a great epochal shift to which the Church was called to respond by deepening and renewing its own witness to the Gospel. But it is just as clear that only the Spirit's impulse could enable the Church to move in this direction.³⁴

NOTES

³⁴ Alberigo, "Le esperienze del Cardinal Roncalli," 99.