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**CHANGING DOCTRINES  
AND THE VATICAN COUNCIL**

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D. B. KNOX

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**THE PROTESTANT FAITH**

The Fourth Session of the Second Vatican Council which consists of Roman Catholic bishops throughout the world, meets in Rome this week. It has been stated that this will be the last session of the Council and it promises to be the most momentous. Already the Council has made some changes with regard to Roman Catholic doctrine. The majority of the Council appear anxious to change doctrine still further. So far these changes have been delayed by the conservative minority. Since the changes already made and even more the ones proposed would bring the Roman Catholic church's teaching closer to the teaching of Scripture, and consequently to the teaching of the Reformation, it is a matter of very great importance to all of us how the debates and decisions of the session go.

Ever since the time of the Reformation the Roman Catholic Church has claimed that

its doctrine has always been the same since the time of Christ, and its great controversialist and Bishop Bossuet declared as an axiom that "variation in religion is always a sign of error", and he used this axiom to discredit protestantism which he claimed was a novelty and therefore could not be the true religion. The protestants on the other hand replied that protestantism was merely a return to the unchanging religion of the scriptures. They agreed that variation was a sign of error but by the test of Scripture it was the Roman Catholic Church which had varied its doctrines and the Reformation was a reform of the variations and a return to the original unchanging Gospel. Thus Isaac Walton (who you will remember was the author of "The Compleat Angler") tells the story of Sir Henry Wotton who visited the church of a friendly priest in Rome to hear the vesper music and the priest "seeing Sir Henry stand obscurely in a corner" sent him a choir boy

with a small piece of paper on which he had written "Where was your religion to be found before Luther?" In reply Sir Henry wrote "My religion was to be found then - where yours is not to be found now - in the written Word of God".

However, the Roman Catholic Church no longer claims that its teaching is always the same. Thus Archbishop Roberts formerly Roman Catholic Archbishop of Bombay and a Jesuit, in his introduction to the book "Contraception and Holiness" published this year on p.16 speaks of the changes in Roman Catholic doctrine since the time of the Reformation. He writes "Contemporary theologians give an entirely different meaning to the word church to the one which was prevalent in the 16th century .... A few centuries ago the word church meant (for Roman Catholics) the Roman Catholic communion, so that the maxim "No salvation out of the church" virtually precluded all non Catholics from being saved.

To-day the word church is understood with much more elasticity to include in effect all (who believe in God with) a good will. Thus the authoritative teaching of four centuries ago concerning salvation outside the church can be recognised as radically different from the position of the bishops at the Second Vatican Council.

"In like manner the statements on freedom of conscience which have been proposed for acceptance by the Second Vatican Council are patently impossible to reconcile with the statements of Pope Pius IX on this same subject only a century ago. There are many other examples of radical changes in the position taken by authority at various times during history, all of which would confirm what Cardinal Newman said concerning the effects of proclaiming papal infallibility: 'What one pope can do another can undo'". Archbishop Roberts adds "There is no need

to catalogue all these reversals". He goes on to apply this concept of change to the prohibition of contraceptives and suggests there is no reason why the church should not change its teaching on what the law of God is on the matter.

Gregory Baum O.S.A. gives another example, on page 265 of the same book. He quotes Pope Pius IX as condemning "that erroneous opinion that is especially injurious to the Catholic Church and the salvation of souls, called by our predecessor Gregory XVI "insane raving", namely that freedom of conscience and of worship is the proper right of each man". Baum adds "This condemnation of freedom, at one time taught with authority demanding obedience, has on the whole been abandoned.

During the present Council, the Roman Catholic Church has already made some important changes. Thus in

the second session it decided to abandon its insistence on the use of Latin in church services. The services and in particular the reading of the Scripture lessons are now widely celebrated in the language of the worshippers. Though this is a change of practice rather than of doctrine, it opens the door for future reformation; for previously the worshipper in a Roman Catholic church did not hear God's Word read to him in a way that he could understand its meaning. Now Sunday by Sunday the lessons are read in his own language with the priest facing the congregation instead of turning his back to the congregation as in the past, and sermons explaining the sacred text are compulsory at every mass, so that God's Word can speak directly to his heart and bring his mind into conformity with God's mind revealed in Scripture.

In last year's session the Council put out a long statement on the doctrine of

the Church. For the most part this document reiterates the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of the Church, namely that the church is constituted by the hierarchy, but in one passage it endorses authoritatively for the first time a radically new teaching about salvation. In paragraph 16 of the constitution of the church, the council extends the possibility of salvation not only to Moslems (who as we know vigorously deny that Christ is the Son of God) but also to the heathen who have no knowledge of Christ nor of God. The Council affirms that these may be saved if they strive to follow the dictates of their conscience. This is plainly out of keeping with traditional Roman Catholic doctrine which in the past insisted that both baptism and submission to the pope were absolutely essential for salvation. For example, this latter is clearly expressed in the famous bull of Boniface VIII which concluded "We declare, say, define and

pronounce that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff". The new teaching is quite different.

The Roman Church has maintained that its unchanging teaching is a sufficient guide to the truth, but if the Roman Catholic teaching changes as we see it has, and as modern Roman Catholic leaders admit it does, what is the standard of truth by which these changes may be tested as to whether they are a change towards or away from the truth which, of course, remains the same and cannot change? Surely the only standard to test such changes in doctrine is the unchanging Word of God given to us in Holy Scripture, of which the Lord Jesus Christ is the centre. This at least is what the Reformation affirmed. Thus it is all the more interesting to note that at this coming session the first subject to be discussed by the Roman Catholic bishops is the

source of revelation. Traditionally, the Roman Catholic Church has taught that there are two sources of revelation - Holy Scripture and tradition - and the Council of Trent affirmed that both are to be received with "equal veneration". It was on the strength of tradition that Pope Pius XII proclaimed as an infallible dogma the belief that the body of the virgin Mary had been raised from the grave and carried up to heaven. It is admitted that the Bible does not teach this doctrine, but the Roman Catholic Church defended it on the ground of tradition, which for then was one of the two sources of revelation. This was only so recently as 1950, but now in the Second Vatican Council the idea of two sources of Revelation has already failed to win acceptance and many of the bishops favour one source - Holy Scripture alone. If this decision is in fact incorporated in the dogma which is to be promulgated at this coming session as the majority of the

bishops appear to desire, it will be a most important change in the traditional teaching of the Roman Catholic church.

Another proposed change is the question of religious freedom, that is to say the right of every man to worship God according to his conscience. This is a right which the Roman Catholic church in the past has denied, as the burnings at the stake at the time of the Reformation plainly show, as does also the present day persecution of protestants in Spain and South America. If this change is in fact adopted by the bishops it will be a most significant event. In effect it will mean that the authoritative and mediatorial position of the church and the priest will give place to a recognition of the direct action of the Holy Spirit on the heart and conscience of men.

All Christians should remember in their prayers the coming session of the Vatican

Council. St. Paul teaches us to pray for all men and especially should we pray for those who are seeking the truth as it is in Christ. For there is the ever present danger that truth will be obscured by compromise. The Council is to make decisions on two most important matters: Holy Scripture as the only source of revelation, and the freedom of the conscience before God. The effects of these decisions will be widespread, perhaps for centuries. Already for example the Government of Spain is waiting to see how the Council decides with regard to religious freedom before it promulgates its proposed liberalising of the laws about protestantism in Spain.

All of us then should be earnest in prayer that God who directs all things will direct the decisions of the Council in conformity with His truth.

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