

Συμπάθεια

Vatican II Legacy: Churches as Feeling Bodies in Relation with the World

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Sixty years after the end of the Second Vatican Council, it would be instructive to reread what Pope Paul VI, the first hermeneut of an event that would have constituted a watershed in the history of churches and humanity, stated:

And what happened? Was there a clash, a battle, a condemnation? There could have been, but there was none. The old story of the Samaritan has been the model of the spirituality of the council. A feeling of boundless sympathy has permeated the whole of it.

These words, pronounced during the last public session of the Council on 7 December 1965, still deserve to be weighed. The Council identified “dialogue” as the fundamental category on which to re-establish the church’s relations with the contemporary world, in three directions: towards all that is human, the believers of the other religions, and all Christians. However, Paul VI, speaking of “sympathy”, a term apparently derived from the most ordinary style of conversation, adds an even more passionate tone to the solemnity of the conciliar statements. This expression could raise today a fundamental question: with all the painful and problematic things that have happened in the meantime, is it still possible to speak of “sympathy” as that essential attitude that all churches could embody in their relationship with each other and with the world? And towards religions, in a time so marked by fratricidal struggles in the name of God?

To answer these crucial questions, we can find inspiration from the etymology of the term “sympathy”, which ultimately derives from the Greek verb “sympathèò”, essentially meaning: “I experience the same affections”. Sympathy, therefore, is not just an instinctive inclination, which attracts people towards one another, but it is precisely that spiritual and emotional attitude which Jesus maintained in his earthly life: he suffered with us and for us. Then, according to the perspective of biology, “sympathy” can also describe that specific relationship which exists among two or more organs in a given body, so that the affection of one is transmitted to the other: this can bring us to mind the Pauline symbolism of the bodily Church (see for example 1Cor 12,12-26), whereby, if even just one of its parts suffers, the whole suffers with it. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate whether this analogy, eventually alluded to by the papal address, can be applied in a more systematic way not only in the intra-ecclesial domains, but also — contextually — in the fields of the ecumenical, interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

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