

John Thavis (/)

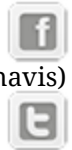
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Cardinal Kasper: Pope Francis has launched 'new phase' on Vatican II
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German Cardinal Walter Kasper

Cardinal Walter Kasper has an important piece in today's *Osservatore Romano*, saying that Pope Francis, with his focus on poverty and social justice issues, has launched a new phase of implementation of the Second Vatican Council.

Cardinal Kasper makes a strong argument that the council's journey of renewal is not over and that the decades of discussion over its teachings should lead to new "practical consequences."

Pope Francis, he said, has pointed the way with his emphasis on a church that becomes poor and serves the poor.

“In this sense, Pope Francis from the first day of his pontificate has given what I would call his prophetic interpretation of the council, and has inaugurated a new phase of its reception. He has changed the agenda: at the top are the problems of the Southern hemisphere,” Cardinal Kasper wrote.

It’s useful to remember that it was Pope John XXIII who presented the image of “the church of all, and in particular the church of the poor” shortly before opening Vatican II in 1962.

Cardinal Kasper said Pope Francis’ election had also underlined a related point: that the church’s make-up has changed greatly since the time of the council.

“At the beginning of the last century, only a quarter of Catholics lived outside Europe; today only a quarter live in Europe and more than two-thirds of Catholics live in the Southern hemisphere, where the church is growing,” he said.

Cardinal Kasper also noted that Pope Francis appears to be open to a more collegial exercise of papal authority. The role of the pope as a unifying figure in the church should not lead to an “exaggerated centralism,” Kasper said.

“Therefore it was very significant that Pope Francis made reference to the bishop of Rome who presides in charity, echoing the famous statement of Ignatius of Antioch. This is of fundamental importance, not only for the continuation of ecumenical dialogue, above all with Orthodox churches, but also for the Catholic Church itself,” he said.

Cardinal Kasper made several other interesting points in the lengthy article, which so far is available only in Italian:

-- The spirit of optimism toward progress in the world and the sense of journeying toward new frontiers, which marked the beginning of Vatican II, are long gone, the cardinal said.

“For most Catholics, the developments put in motion by the council are part of the church’s daily life. But what they are experiencing is not the great new beginning nor the springtime of the church, which were expected at that time, but rather a church that has a wintry look, and shows clear signs of crisis,” he said.

That doesn’t mean Vatican II is no longer relevant, he said, but that “the church needs to take seriously the legitimate requests of the modern age. It needs to defend the faith against pluralism and postmodern relativism, as well as the fundamentalist tendencies that run from reason.”

-- Kasper credited Pope Benedict XVI with promoting a balanced approach to Vatican II, and said the retired pope had a goal of “renewal in continuity.”

At the same time, the cardinal seemed to respond to a talk given by Pope Benedict two weeks before his resignation, in which Benedict said a dominant misinterpretation of the council had “created so many disasters, so many problems, so much suffering: seminaries closed, convents closed, banal liturgy.”

Kasper said some critics still consider Vatican II as “a disaster and the greatest calamity in recent times.” But the cardinal said it was wrong to presume that “everything that happened after the council also happened because of the council,” and that the critics need to look more closely at more general social trends of that era.

-- One reason Vatican II documents have “an enormous potential for conflict” is that compromise language was adopted on many crucial issues, opening the door to selective interpretation in one direction or another, Kasper said.

-- Overall, Vatican II teachings have given new impetus to life in dioceses, parishes and religious communities, especially through liturgical renewal, new spiritual movements, better knowledge of Scripture and dialogue with non-Catholics, he said.

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