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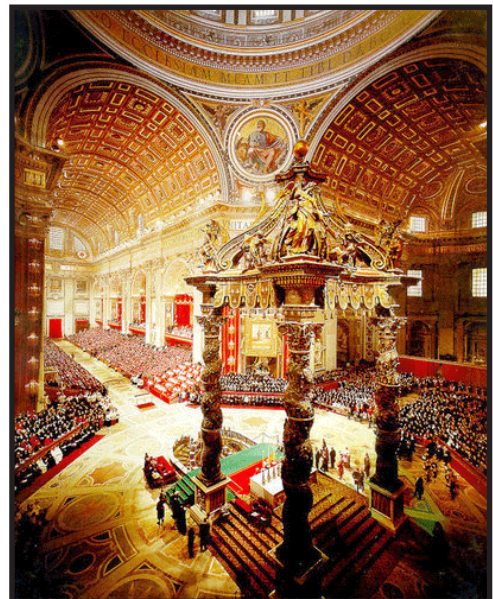
May, 2009

LOUIS QUERBES (1793-1859) AND THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

Dear Viatorians,

The year 2009 is a time of significant anniversaries. On September 1, 2009 we will celebrate the sesquicentennial of the death of our founder, Jean Louis Joseph Marie Querbes. Every year this date in September provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the important contributions that Fr. Querbes made to the society in which he lived and to the Church which he loved. This year the anniversary of his death will be marked by special observances in Vourles. These international celebrations, planned for August 30, 31, and September 1, will afford us a unique occasion to reflect even more deeply on the heritage that is ours as religious and associates, as people who have chosen to live out our baptismal consecration as Viatorians, serving the Church and the world as co-heirs to Fr. Querbes' charism. Our celebrations are all the more heartfelt this year since the founder's Cause has been introduced in Rome. More and more people are becoming familiar with the details of the founder's life and drawing inspiration from his example of dedication and faith.

January 25, 2009 marked another important occasion: the fiftieth anniversary of the convocation of the Second Vatican Council by Blessed Pope John XXIII. This event, more than any other recent event in the history of the Church forever changed the way Catholics think of themselves and their mission in the



world. We all know about this council. It is the constant point of reference for how we look at practically every aspect of our life as Catholics and Viatorians. Vatican II issued documents on a range of topics that still determine how we understand what it means to be a Christian today. Liturgy, catechesis, religious life, ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue, missionary activity, the nature of the Church itself and its relationship with the modern world were all themes treated during the council. Celebrated from 1962-1965, this meeting was directly responsible for beginning the process that transformed our religious congregation, whose members were exclusively vowed religious priests and brothers, into the Viatorian Community now also composed of lay men and women who share Fr. Querbes' vision of a plural community—lay, religious, and ordained—a community that works to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ through witness, catechesis, and worship.

Fr. Querbes and Vatican II

The convergence of these anniversaries will be the focus of this letter. At first glance, though, it may not be so apparent that Fr. Querbes could have any relationship to Vatican II. After all, almost one hundred years separates his death from the convocation of the council. He lived and worked in a small town outside of Lyon and was not a major theologian or even an extraordinarily well-known figure in the French Church of the 19th century. While exceptional in many ways, Fr. Querbes was a man of his day. He was greatly influenced by the events and passions that swept the Church in post-revolutionary France struggling to re-establish the faith after a period of war and persecution. Along with many other members of the French clergy he was an “ultramontanist,” believing in the importance of the papacy as the unique guarantor for the purity of the faith and the solution to the disunity of a Church made vulnerable and weak by the European Enlightenment and the French revolution. He was also a royalist, convinced that the union of throne and altar was the best way of promoting the Gospel and the best hope of restoring the Christian traditions of the French nation.

Because he was a man of his day—the nineteenth century—it should surprise no one that if transported one hundred years into the future, Fr. Querbes, monarchist and ultramontanist, would probably be uncomfortable with some of the documents of the Second Vatican Council. The council's declaration on religious freedom, *Dignitatis humanae: On the right of persons and communities to social and civil freedom in matters religious* contradicts his preference for an absolute monarchy and a confessional state as the best form of government. He would

also have been ill at ease with the talk regarding the collegiality of bishops. Expressed in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen gentium 22*, the notion of collegiality promoted by the Council recovered a more traditional and less centralized conception of authority in the Church that had been located almost exclusively on the Pope since the nineteenth century and the first Vatican Council. Fr. Querbes, as an ardent proponent of the restoration of the monarchy and Church, saw the need to establish stability in society by promoting the notion of the patriarchal family as the basic building block of a well-ordered society.¹ It was natural that this notion would be reflected in the government: the king on top controlling a well-ordered social pyramid where all knew their place. Democracy and participatory government were suspect in his eyes since when the democratic revolution of 1789 overthrew the *Ancien Régime* in the name of “*fraternité, égalité, and liberté*” overturning many of the prerogatives of the Church. From Fr. Querbes’ point of view it was this revolution, spawned by the godless rationalists of the Enlightenment that brought about the very conditions against which he fought all his life: religious ignorance and indifference.

Fr. Querbes’ “Conciliar Intuitions”

Despite the vast difference in Church and society that separates our time from that of Fr. Querbes, I am convinced that the founder anticipated the basic thrust of Vatican II in several important ways. It is not that he mysteriously predicted the reforms of the council, but Fr. Querbes’ pastoral approach to living out the faith in daily life anticipates the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. Some have evocatively spoken of Fr. Querbes’ “conciliar intuitions”²—an expression that I find both helpful and appropriate.

How, then, was Fr. Querbes “on the same wave length” as the Second Vatican Council? Many of the presuppositions that undergird the documents of Vatican II were the same ideas and assumptions that inspired the founder during his lifetime. Fr. Querbes responded to the pastoral needs of his day in many of the same creative ways used by the bishops of Vatican II one hundred years later to establish a new relationship between the Church and the modern world. In order to see more clearly what Fr. Querbes has in common with the documents of Vatican II, it is helpful to review the basic approach to renewal employed by the council. In a recent book on Vatican II,³ Fr. John O’Malley, SJ, distinguished Church historian, noted that there were three elements or approaches upon which the fathers of the Council built their program of reform: *aggiornamento, ressourcement, and development*.

The first, *aggiornamento*—is an Italian word that simply means “updating” or “modernizing.” It looks at the present reality in which the Church lives. The introductory words of the first council document, The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1), indicates that the purpose of this council was “to adapt to the needs of our age those institutions that are subject to change.” Many aspects of the church—its liturgy, its laws, its organization, and its way of dealing with the world, had been frozen in time. The Church had seen the outside world—the secular culture—as a threat to the faith since the Reformation and especially during the 18th century. In distinction to the changing world, the Church had prided itself as being unchanging and eternal. While stability is usually a good thing, petrification is not. Pope John XXIII, in convoking the council, saw the need for the renewal of Church institutions in order to more effectively proclaim the Gospel. Naturally, *aggiornamento* requires a dialogue between what the Church teaches and the world of today so that effective communication is possible. It is based on the conviction announced by none other than Jacques Maritain, the great scholar of Thomas Aquinas, that Catholicism possesses “a bold ability to adapt itself to the new conditions erupting suddenly in the life of the world.”⁴

The second element or approach to renewal present in the documents of the council is represented by the French word “*ressourcement*.” While *aggiornamento* deals specifically with the present, *ressourcement* signifies a return “to the sources” of the past in order to make the present more authentic. This is a favorite approach to renewal in the Church down through the ages. Renewal should be a matter of searching for precedents in history that are able to better respond to current needs. Examples of this approach abound. Erasmus in the 16th century sought a reform that would return Christians to period of the Bible and the fathers of the Church. The Liturgical Movement that began with the Dom Prosper Guéranger in the 19th century, saw in the traditional Roman Rite, freed from the accretions of the late Middle Ages, a guide for connecting worship with the faith life of all the baptized. The very renewal of religious life promoted by the council in *Perfectae caritatis*, in addition to updating or *aggiornamento*, calls upon religious institutes to return to their “source”: the charism of their respective founders. All of these are examples of *ressourcement*.

Finally, the third element proposed by O’Malley is that of development. While *aggiornamento* is concerned with the present, and *ressourcement* with the past, development looks to the future. It regards tradition as dynamic rather than inert or static, and acknowledges that the Church and its teachings, although essentially unchanging at their core, have also

undergone a dynamic evolution over the course of history. The proclamation of the dogma of the Assumption of Mary in 1950 by Pius XII is an example of a belief held for centuries that was finally defined. The Church's attitude toward human slavery, for example, has undergone a dramatic change, from acceptance up to the 19th century to absolute rejection in the 20th century. These are examples of a dynamic "development" in both dogma and practice that is part and parcel of the life of the Church. First systematically described by the great nineteenth century theologian and convert Cardinal John Henry Newman, the possibility that the Church can undergo a "development" in its thought and discipline is a key presupposition of many of the documents the council.

All three approaches to renewal have one thing in common: they take history seriously. In fact, it could also be said that for the first time in the history of the Church decisions were made with a real consciousness of the importance of history. Unlike the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council that drew up theological propositions that took scant heed of changing historical or cultural circumstance, the documents of Vatican II acknowledge the importance of both history and culture in proclaiming and living the Gospel. Tradition, while important, can never be interpreted in a vacuum. One can only be faithful to Tradition in the context of the ebb and flow of history and cultural interaction. As O'Malley states in reference to *aggiornamento*, *ressourcement* and development: "One basic, crucial assumption underlay all three as they were understood by the council: the Catholic tradition is richer, broader, and more malleable than the way in which it had often, especially since the nineteenth century, been interpreted."⁵

When we look at the undergirding presuppositions of Vatican II we can see that Fr. Querbes while perhaps unenthusiastic about *aggiornamento*, consistently employed *ressourcement* and development in order to respond to the needs of his day. His "conciliar intuitions" would also lead him in practice to espouse surprisingly contemporary convictions about the nature of the church and the role of lay people in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. At a time when the Catholic Church was generally very wary of using the Bible as a source of piety and inspiration, Louis Querbes proposes an exposure to the words of scripture as a fundamental part of the formation of the members of his institute. Although I am not an historian, and others may be more competent in interpreting Fr. Querbes' approach to both Church and ministry, I would like to suggest the ways in which the founder anticipated some of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

A Creative Approach to Tradition—Examples of Ressourcement

One of the key features of Fr. Querbes life was that he was attentive to the needs of the day. Like many of his fellow priests of France of the Restoration he sought to reestablish the Church as a pillar of French society. Tradition was important to him, but his life and his work did not revolve around a mechanical and spiritless imposition of the “good old days.” He realized that conditions in both society and church had changed and that new solutions were now called for in order to promote his goal of, in his words, “evangelizing Jesus Christ.” After seeing that the traditional religious communities of men could not respond to the needs of his small rural parish, he developed his idea of establishing an association of dedicated lay parochial catechists who could be sent out by one’s and two’s to the remote areas in the country.

At the same time he examined the history of the Church and looked for precedents in the tradition to give credibility to this group of laymen. In a way, his reading of the tradition in light of current needs could be considered subversive. In a post-Tridentine church that was very hierarchical and clerical he envisioned giving credibility to a group of laymen by appealing to a decision of the council of Trent that had never been put into practice. In a wonderful example of “ressourcement” he proposed to implement the following decree:

That the functions of holy orders, ... which have been laudably received in the Church from the times of the apostles, and which have been for some time interrupted in very many places, may be again brought into use in accordance with the sacred canons; . . . And if there should not be unmarried clerics at hand to exercise the functions of the four minor orders, ***their place may be supplied by married clerics of approved life***; provided they have not been twice married, be competent to discharge the said duties, and wear the tonsure and the clerical dress in church. (Session 23, Ch. 17)⁶

The practical outcome of implementing this decision of the 16th century would have been to re-establish a kind of married clergy in the Roman Rite of the Catholic Church. Granted, it had to do with inducting lay people into the clerical state through minor orders, but in a nineteenth century Church that linked Holy Orders with celibacy as a prerequisite for ministry, implementing this decree would have in a way opened the Church to what we would call today “lay ministry.” Unfortunately, this proposal was never supported by the Church authorities. Nevertheless, it is reflected in the official name our Institute that has always included brothers (non-clerics) within its ranks: The Congregation of the Parochial Clerics or Catechists of St. Viator. This notion of re-envisioning the organization of ministry would be realized after the council by Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Letter *Ministeria Quaedam* in

1972 that announced that the ministries of lector and acolyte were no longer regarded by the Church as a monopoly of “clerics” but also open to the laity.

Another example of Fr. Querbes creative interpretation of the Tradition of the Church was his proposal regarding a key formational tool that he advanced for his new institute: the *Legend*. Derived from the Latin term “*legenda*” (that which is to be read), the Legend was to be to the Viatorian as the breviary was to one in Holy Orders. (Note that this presupposes the largely lay-character of the association since all of those in major orders would still be bound to the recitation of the breviary.) The Legend consisted of three readings: the Bible (both Old and New Testaments), the Catechism of the Council of Trent, and Thomas à Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*. The great innovation here, of course, is the reading from the sacred scriptures which was not at all considered a “Catholic” thing to do in the 19th Century. The Bible—especially if it were read in private—was seen as a mark of Protestant devotion since it opened the reader to a possible personal interpretation of Scripture unaided by orthodox Catholic teaching. This, of course, was an attitude born of the controversies of the 16th century Reformation. In the early Church, reading the Bible—or at least hearing the scriptures read—was considered a basic part of the formation of any Christian. This more venerable tradition of the Church regarding the Bible is summed up in the saying of the great Biblical translator St. Jerome: “ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”⁷

Fr. Querbes’ insistence that his society of catechists be formed with an enlightened faith, based on a deep familiarity with both the Word of God as well as Catholic teaching is another example of “ressourcement.” The readings prescribed for the old Rite of Mass were really insufficient for this purpose. As more “mature” Viatorians will recall, there were only two readings prescribed in the Tridentine Rite of Mass—the Epistle and the Gospel—and the Old Testament was practically never read. Even when these readings were done in the vernacular (after they had been duly read in Latin by the priest) they offered a very partial exposure to the Word of God—even for someone who would assist at daily Mass. Fr. Querbes’ intuition about the Bible was wholly vindicated by the liturgical renewal of Vatican II which, in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, directed a reform of the lectionary.

The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word. In this way a more representative portion of the Holy Scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years (SC 51).

In fact, while Fr. Querbes' understanding of liturgy was very often limited to the notion of "following the rubrics" or ceremonial directives contained in the official books and practiced by the majority of priests of his day, it also must be said that his concern for the involvement of the faithful at the celebration of Mass precedes the same concern voiced by the founder of the 19th century liturgical movement, the Benedictine Prosper Guéranger (+1875). Guéranger who lived a generation after the founder, was convinced of the need for the Church to return to a liturgy that was not just a clerical preserve, but the main source of common prayer for all the faithful. It was especially in the realm of music where this participation was to be encouraged. While Guéranger would promote a renaissance of Gregorian plain chant, especially appropriate in his monastic context, the founder's work of collecting quality music for the liturgy within the capabilities of lay people could be considered to have the same purpose: the participation of the assembly.⁸ What has been said about Guéranger could be equally applied to Louis Querbes,

. . . by asserting that his goal was to move the members of the congregation from a passive to a more active role in liturgical celebrations, from praying the rosary during Mass or reading their novena prayers to paying attention to the liturgical action itself, he enunciated a principle that the decree on the liturgy at Vatican II would take to its logical conclusion.⁹

The clarion call of Vatican II for all the baptized to "full conscious and active participation"¹⁰ in the liturgical event is perhaps the most important principle of the reform—a principle that was at least partially anticipated in the pastoral work of Louis Querbes.

Development

Fr. Querbes' approach was distinctive: ministry for lay people; the Bible as a source of spirituality; the common worship of God's people in the liturgy. All of these point to a person who was able to go beyond what we would regard as the limitations of the 19th century Church to embrace a broader vision of Christianity that could more effectively proclaim the good news of Jesus to the people of his day. When studied with attention, it is apparent that the founder's original project for a society of catechists was based on a "conciliar intuition" later proclaimed by Vatican II that looked at the Church as the People of God—a Church in which all—lay as well as religious and clerics—could contribute to building up the Reign of God. As our "*fondateur contrarié*" continued to try to implement his vision, the association of predominantly lay catechists he originally proposed was transformed into a more traditional

religious community. But this does not belie the fact that Fr. Querbes' ecclesiology was not limited to the common 19th century understanding of the Church as a "perfect society" governed by bishops and priests and in which the laity's contribution was relegated to pay, pray and obey. His vision was broader and more inclusive. As Fr. Pierre Laur rightly points out:

Louis conceived of the Church as a visual expression of the People of God...he sought for a way of emphasizing the role of the laity, living out all the while, despite the tensions, a deep fidelity to his bishops and the Pope. The presence of lay people, religious and priests in his institute is the concrete and symbolic expression of this People in its diversity and unity...His insistence to maintain the lay branch of the Society proves that he has the conviction to live out communion in a people of brothers and sisters.¹¹

While Louis Querbes was a man of the 19th Century, through his ministry and intuitions he presaged a conception of Church that would be more fully developed by the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*. We can see however, that the founder's intuitions and instinctive pastoral approach to the challenges of his day illustrate a real development in the common pre-Vatican II understanding of the Church. This intuition will be the keystone for the development of our own Viatorian Community after the council: a community that represents a kind of microcosm of the larger church by being composed of religious priests and brothers and associates, lay and clerical.



Fr. Querbes, N. Greschny, Chapel, Treize-Pierres, France

Conclusion

During this anniversary year marking the 150th anniversary of his death, we celebrate the example of holiness and insight we have inherited from Fr. Querbes. We rejoice all the more since this heritage corresponds so well with the basic teachings of the ecumenical council that would be convoked 100 years after his death that we know as Vatican II. We are challenged by the life of our founder to take Christian history seriously. Louis Querbes well represents the scribe “trained for the kingdom of Heaven” described by Jesus who “is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Mat 13:52).



**“The Death of Fr. Querbes,”
Sint-Jan Berchmanscollege, Westmalle, Belgium**

Our challenge today is to not fall into a blind nostalgia that prevents us from creatively applying the experience of previous generations to the current needs of the Church. Our plural community, open to a critical dialogue with the people and cultures of our day, faithful to the intuitions of our founder and the documents of Vatican II, can continue to be a beacon of hope for many who are searching for the presence of Jesus in a Church that sometimes seems overly institutional and out of touch.

In the last and most mature document of Vatican II, The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*), the council fathers propose a vision of the Church open to the challenges of the world and open to dialogue with all people of good will in order to bring about the Reign of God proclaimed by Jesus. The basis of this proclamation

is a sensitive and compassionate reading of the signs of the times, taking seriously the experience of our brothers and sisters around the world, especially those who are beset by poverty and oppressive social conditions. As Viatorians, faithful to the intuitions of the servant of God, Louis Querbes, we can confidently make the opening words of *Gaudium et spes* our own.

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.



Mark R. Francis, C.S.V.
Superior General

Endnotes

¹ Robert Bonnafous, C.S.V., *Un fondateur contrarié LOUIS QUERBES 1793 - 1859*, Tome I : *Les années de formation et de fondation* (Vourles : Les Clercs de Saint-Viateur, 2004) 221.

² Pierre Laur, C.S.V., *Au seuil d'une spiritualité viatorienne* (Rome : Éditions Saint-Viateur, 2004) 203ss.

³ John W. O'Malley, S.J., *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Antimoderne* (Paris: Éditions de la Revue des jeunes, 1922).

⁵ O'Malley, *What Happened ...*, 37.

⁶ The Council of Trent: *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*, Ed. and trans. by J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848) 186, 187.

⁷ S. Hieronymus, *Commentarium in Isaias* (Nn. 1.2: *Corpus Christianorum Latinorum* 73, 1-3).

⁸ On Fr. Querbes and liturgy see the collection of essays from the 2003 Valladolid Conference, *In the Steps of Louis Querbes: Updating the Charism*. (Rome: Editions Saint-Viateur, 2003). Also see Pierre Laur 's discussion of Fr. Querbes' approach to liturgy in *Au seuil ...*, 174-202.

⁹ O'Malley, *What Happened ...*, 73.

¹⁰ Sacrosanctum Concilium 14.

¹¹ Pierre Laur, C.S.V., *Au seuil ...*, 204.