

Yves Congar: Apostle of Patience

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Abstract: *Yves Congar, a French Dominican priest, was one of the pioneers in the Church's theology of ecumenism and the place of the laity in the Church. As with most pioneers breaking new ground and exploring new avenues, he encountered suspicion, hostility and active opposition and sanctions from Church authorities. For a time, he was banned for ecumenical work including speaking and lectures and banished from France to Rome and England. During all this he managed to maintain a deep love for the Church and a loyalty to his Order and to his deeply felt insights. His scholarly work has had a profound impact on contemporary theology. Eventually, he was exonerated and became one of the most influential theologians at the Second Vatican Council. Shortly before his death he was made a cardinal of the Church.*

Key Words: Yves Congar; ecumenism; 20th century Catholic theology; Vatican II; magisterium-academic relations; Catholic reform; Dominican scholarship

The year 2004 marked the 100th anniversary of the births of four theological giants of the 20th century: Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, John Courtney Murray and Yves Congar. Besides sharing a common birth year, all four were theological pioneers whose impact on contemporary theological development is still felt today. As original and creative thinkers all but Lonergan aroused suspicion and disciplinary action from Roman ecclesiastical authorities, but it was Congar who was most seriously and personally affected by the encounters with Vatican churchmen.

In September 1956 the French Dominican theologian and ecumenist, Yves Congar, wrote to his mother to explain why, two years previously, he had been silenced by church authorities: "What put me wrong (in their eyes) is not having said false things, but having said things they do not like to have said."¹

Congar's deep concern for truth led him to continue saying things that some Church authorities did not wish to hear during his long and influential career spanning the late thirties to 1982 when he published his last book. His claim that the word priest in Apostolic times, for instance, referred either to priests of the Levitical order and is accurately applied only to Christ or the baptized – not the ministers of the Church hierarchy – was revolutionary at the time.

For most of his theological career, Congar worked under the intense scrutiny of Vatican authorities with their continual accusations, suspicions and restrictions on his writings and ministry: "From the beginning of 1947 to the end of 1956," he once wrote, "I knew nothing from that quarter [Rome] but an uninterrupted series of denunciations, warnings, restrictive or discriminatory measures, and mistrustful interventions."² The

¹ Yves Congar, "Silenced for Saying Things Rome Didn't Like to Have Said," *National Catholic Reporter*, June 2, 2000, 3.

² Yves Congar, *Dialogue Between Christians* (London, Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), 34.

situation, however, was not destined to last forever and his silencing was only a brief but painful interruption in a brilliant career of loyal service to the Church. The Church would eventually come to accept his views and honour him for them, but only after a long and difficult struggle with Roman authorities at the highest level. His personal and, until recently, unpublished account of his dealings with what he called the "Roman hydra" are now available in *Journal d'un théologien 1946-1956*.

Congar once described himself as being a very impatient person: "I am impatient in little things. I am incapable of waiting for a bus."³ But his long and tense relationship with ecclesiastical authorities characterized by a patience that knew no limits belied this assessment. He believed that as a reformer he had to avoid the temptation to plant the seed, but then try to hurry it along and clear the field: "People who are in too much of a hurry, who wish to grasp the object of their desires immediately, are also incapable of it. The patient sower, who entrusts his seed to the earth and the sun, is also the man of hope. Coventry Patmore has said that to the man who waits all things reveal themselves, provided that he has the courage not to deny in the darkness what he has seen in the light."⁴

This wisdom, however, did not prevent him from being what he called a nuisance for his continued prodding, exploring, challenging and trying in whatever ways to open to him to bring about his vision of the Church. His personal difficulties with Church authorities contributed both to his work for ecclesial reform and his own spiritual growth as a review of this one aspect of his multifaceted life will indicate.

Yves Congar was born in 1904 in Sedan, in the French Ardennes. At that time his compatriot the Jesuit scientist Teilhard de Chardin was teaching at a Jesuit scholasticate. Teilhard's writings on original sin and evolution would, like Congar's on other topics, also eventually incur disciplinary actions from the Vatican.

As a young man in his early twenties, Congar spent three years in a Carmelite monastery where he encountered Thomistic philosophy through the works of the renowned lay philosopher Jacques Maritain and the Dominican theologian Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange. Many years later it was Lagrange who, as an influential consultant to the Holy Office, would become Teilhard's chief protagonist. Congar was also attracted to the Benedictines and after spending some time with them decided in 1925 to enter a novitiate of the French Dominicans at Amiens. Following his theological studies at the seminary at Le Saulchoir in Etioilles, near Paris with its strong emphasis on historical theology, Congar was ordained a priest in 1930. As early as 1929 he had recognized his call to labor in the cause of ecumenism and in October of 1931 he chose as the topic for his doctoral thesis *The Unity of the Church*.

Following ordination, Congar taught theology for the next eight years at Le Saulchoir which in the mid-1950's was a center of theological controversy that resulted in the dismissal of several prominent professors including one of Congar's former professors, the Dominican theologian, Marie Dominique. Chenu, who was nine years older than Congar, played a significant role in the latter's theological formation. It was Chenu who first introduced Congar to the work of the ecumenical Lausanne Faith and Order Conference in 1927 and the thought of Johannan Adam Mohler whose ground-breaking book on the Church Congar would eventually translate in 1938.

Other prominent scholars who influenced Congar's intellectual development were Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain and the Russian mystic, Nicholas Berdyaev. He also

³ Ibid, 44.

⁴ Ibid, 44-45.

studied Luther, Mohler and Barth. Early in his academic career Congar made contact with the leading Protestant theologian, Karl Barth and in the spring of 1932 he befriended Dom Lambert Beauduin who, at the request of Pope Pius XI in 1925, had founded a monastery of monks from both Eastern and Western rites. By the time Congar met him, Beauduin himself was under suspicion and living in exile because of Rome's displeasure with his work and thought.

Early on Congar was aware of the Church's tendency to condemn innovations when the reactionary French lay Catholic social action movement, L'Action Francaise, was banned by Pius XI (later reinstated by Pius XII). In his personal diaries he wondered why the Church always had to condemn sometimes quickly and with no explanation. Congar was beginning to realize that anyone promoting the cause of Christian unity in those early days had been more or less disowned by Church authorities. He knew that the early pioneers "who had achieved anything and had opened up new were bound to have difficulties"⁵ He was, perhaps, unconsciously preparing himself in advance for all the problems and trials he would eventually encounter in his own life's work for Christian unity and Church reform.

Having met Abbe Courtier, a priest from Lyon and the originator of the idea of universal prayer for unity in 1932, Congar was invited in 1936 to preach a series of sermons at the first Christian unity octave at Paris's historical Sacre Coeur church in the Montmartre section of the city. These talks later formed the foundation for his book, *Divided Christendom: a Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion*, published in 1937. The book, that first brought him to the attention of the Roman authorities, argued that other Christian denominations had at times preserved elements of Christianity better than the Catholic Church. The work of preaching for Christian unity became a focal point of his life and ministry. Every year thereafter he was asked to preach in some part of the world each January during the annual celebration of Christian Unity Octave Week.

In the following year, 1937, Congar received a first hint of concern from Rome, when he was forbidden by the then Secretary of State to Pope Pius XI, Eugenio Cardinal Pacelli, to be an official observer, though not to attend, an ecumenical conference which Congar himself had helped organize in Oxford England. Years later he would return to England but under very- different and rather unpleasant circumstances.

In 1939 Chenu and Congar were both called to Paris by the Master General of the Dominica Order and warned that serious difficulties had arisen from their theological writings. Congar's book *Divided Christendom* had raised concerns at the Holy Office, though it was not made clear to him precisely what the problem was. In that same year Congar was drafted as a military chaplain and spent 1940-1945 as a prisoner of the Germans in Prussia, Saxony and Silesia. In March 1942, during his interment he was publicly criticized by a high-ranking though unnamed Vatican official in the pages of *L'Osservatore Romano*, the official organ of the Holy See. More bad news arrived in letter from friends in the spring of 1942 when he learned that his Dominican colleague Chenu had been dismissed as rector of the seminary at Le Saulchoir and his book, whose theological vision and method Congar shared, had been put on the Church's Index of Forbidden Books. Congar felt that it was only the fact of his being outside the country that he himself remained unscathed

At the end of the war in 1946 rumors began circulating about an impending crackdown from Rome signaling a change in the direction of the Church by the new Pope Pius XII. Concern in Rome about Congar's *Divided Christendom* still lingered and new

⁵ Ibid, 10.

objections arose to some of his other publications. In December of 1947 he was refused permission to write an article on Catholic ecumenism requested by the World Council of Churches in preparation for a meeting in Amsterdam the following year. Meanwhile his highly popular book *Divided Christendom* was out of print but still very much in demand. His publishers asked him to prepare a new edition. His religious superiors required him to submit any revision for prior censorship to prevent further problems with Rome. It took Congar six months to complete and on October 2, 1948 the manuscript was taken to Rome. Nothing more was heard of it until August 17, 1950 when he was told that in light of the forthcoming encyclical of the Pope (published in 1950 as *Humani Generis*) certain additional changes were demanded, although he was not told precisely what they were.

Congar later stated that this tactic of his superiors was actually their attempt to limit the role of Roman censors by allowing Congar himself to propose a satisfactory text. Since so much had changed in the world of ecumenism in the meantime between the work's first publication and the proposed revision Congar abandoned the project entirely. Reflecting on these events in 1966, he said that even though by then he would have had no problems from Rome in publishing a new edition, but he felt that the ecumenical situation had changed too much: "That for which I was once reproached has now been accepted by all ecumenists."⁶

In 1947, a year before the Amsterdam ecumenical meeting of churches, which saw the formation of the World Council of Churches, Congar was asked by the organizers to submit a list of ten suitable persons to represent the Catholic Church. This request, no doubt, came from his widespread reputation in the field of ecumenism. Congar meanwhile, had approached Cardinal Emanuel Suhard of Paris for advice and was authorized by him to write to the Archbishop of Utrecht recommending ten or twelve official Catholic observers. Suhard was under the impression that Congar had received permission from Rome to name four observers, which was certainly not the case. The Assistant Secretary General of the World Council of Churches simply wanted to deal directly with Catholics who were well informed and sympathetic to the ecumenical movement which is why Congar was asked to suggest names. Congar had a well-deserved reputation for openness among Protestants though not in his own Church community.

Rome was eventually informed of these negotiations and on June 6, 1948 issued a monitum or warning reserving to itself the right to appoint observers to the Amsterdam meeting. This gave Congar reason to hope that at least there would be some Catholics presence at the ecumenical gathering. His hopes were dashed, however, when on June 28th the Cardinal of Utrecht informed Congar that the Holy Office would not grant any authorization for any Catholic participation in the Amsterdam meeting. As it happened, Catholic experts were in the city during the meeting, though not as official observers, and did not take part in any of the actual meetings. The whole experience taught Congar a painful lesson. It was also a major turning point in his own life. He was he said, not made for any kind of negotiations that demanded "prudence, tact and circumspection" but he knew there was more to it than that: "I may have one of these gifts, but certainly not all of them. In addition, I was irremediably suspect and under surveillance; my actions, real or supposed, were interpreted in advance in a reprehensible sense."⁷

On December 20, 1949, apparently as a result of this incident, the Holy Office published guidelines for official Catholic participation in the ecumenical movement, which actually legalized, but with careful restrictions, what was already being done in many

⁶ Yves Congar, *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion* (London: G. Bles, 1939), 36.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

places. Congar did not chafe at the restrictions and made it clear that he himself had never “either before or since, taken part in a meeting without the usual authorization, any more than I have ever published a line in contravention of the rule imposed upon me.”⁸ The rules and restrictions became even more stringent after the 1950 publication of *Humani Generis*, though Congar still managed to publish his ground-breaking and popular *True and False Reform in the Church* at the end of the same year.

The ecumenical movement received another shock in the opinion of many when in 1950 Pius XII defined as infallible the doctrine of the bodily assumption of Mary. Congar’s strategy, he later recalled, was a renewed determination to be as discreet as possible in ecumenical matters, especially in his public writing: “For my own part, I was as discreet as possible in overtly ecumenical matters, particularly as far as publications were concerned. I felt that the condemnation or formal disavowal of a book like *Cretiens desunis* would set the ecumenical movement back thirty years. At this particular juncture I could serve the cause best by keeping silent and by publishing nothing.”⁹

In February of the following year the Holy Office barred an Italian edition of *True and False Reform in the Church* including all translations in any other languages. He was also ordered to submit all future writings, including even small reviews directly to Rome. He readily complied but commented privately that such actions show the incredible narrowness of censorship. Despite such censorship his manuscripts were approved, at times, for publication, although after the 1954 “raid” on the Dominicans noted below, Roman censorship became more and more distrustful.

On May 13, 1952 Congar joined other Catholic ecumenists to establish the “Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions” with support from the Jesuit theologian and ecumenist, Augustine Bea. Bea later became the first Cardinal President of the Vatican’s Secretariat for Christian Unity established by Pope John XXIII and spearheaded the cause of ecumenism during the Second Vatican Council. Despite the climate in the Church at the time and Roman reservations about bringing together ecumenical workers under one banner, Congar pushed ahead with the project quoting the French spiritual writer, Pere Lacordaire: “I have long thought that the most favorable moments for sowing and planting are times of trouble and storm,”¹⁰ The gathering took place in August 1952 with Congar providing theological treatises which were read at the meeting. He also drafted reports to be shared with the World Council of Churches, but since no official contact was allowed with this organization, his reports were sent unsigned.

While the ecumenical scene might have looked promising to Congar and other Catholic ecumenists, storm clouds were gathering. In the fall of 1953 the Vatican ended the experiment of France’s worker priests which had the full support of the Emanuel Suhard, the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris. Pleas by French church officials to save the movement fell on deaf ears provoking Congar to remark; “One can condemn a solution if it false; one cannot condemn a problem.”¹¹

The storm broke on February 6, 1954 when the Master General of the Dominican Order in Rome, the Spanish Emanuel Suarez, appeared in Paris at the command of the Holy Office. Three Jesuit Provincials from Paris, Lyons and Toulouse were removed from office and four prominent and influential theologians (Boisselet, Feret, Chenu and Congar)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, 39-40.

¹⁰ Ibid, 41.

¹¹ Hans Kung, *My Struggle for Freedom* (London: Continuum, 2002), 101.

were banished from Paris. A detailed and fascinating account of this can be found in Thomas O'Meara's *Raid on the Dominicans, America*, February 5, 1944.

From his own previous altercations with the Holy Office Congar was well aware of Rome's objections to his own writings on ecumenism and church reform. If any theologians were to be disciplined, he would surely be among them. Congar was banned from teaching and ordered to obtain prior permission from Rome for any future writings. His response was immediate and blunt: calling the action absurd and simply inconceivable. At his own suggestion Congar was assigned to the Jerusalem's prestigious *Ecole Biblique* where he wrote *Mystery of the Temple* which had seven censors and took three years to publish. On February 9th he confided to his journal: "The bishops have bent over backwards in passiveness and servility: they have an honest and childlike reverence for Rome, even an childish and infantile reverence... for them this is 'the Church'... In concrete Rome is the Pope, the whole system of congregations which appear as if they are this church... The "Holy Office" in practice rules the church and makes everyone bow down to it through fear or through interventions. It is the supreme Gestapo, unyielding, whose decisions cannot be discussed."¹²

During his stay in Jerusalem he wrote a book that required seven censors and a publication delay of some four years. While there he still ruminates about the experience wondering how far he should cooperate with the system: "Today I am afraid that the absoluteness and simplicity of obedience is drawing me into a complicity with this abhorrent system of secret denunciations which is the essential condition of the 'Holy Office' ... if the Father General has taken sanctions against Chenu, Feret, Boisselot and me without reason—I mean without any other reason than the dissatisfaction of the 'Holy Office' and its scribes of the papal court—he is working for the suspicions and lies which falsely burden us...It is the system and the lies inherent in it which one must utterly reject."¹³

In September he was called to Rome by the Holy Office but never actually interviewed. During his stay he was not allowed to preach or lecture nor even meet with students in the parlor of his residence. In February 1955 he is assigned to Blackfriars, the Dominican house of studies in Cambridge where he was still forbidden any public talks and all publications. Later he recalled his time in England as a very hard eleven months of language difficulties, odious restrictions on his ministry, his movements and his contacts with Protestants. In September 1956 he confides to his journal: "Here I have endured unfathomable feelings of emptiness and absence. No one. Nothing. Certainly the weather is also to blame... caught in the rain outside and waiting under a tree for it to clear up, I begin to weep bitterly. Will I always be a pauvre type? All alone, will I endlessly be carrying suitcases around everywhere? Will I always be without anyone and anything like an orphan?... I weep for such a long time, perhaps an hour, and then again repeatedly... in view of the evidence that has now forced itself home on me that I have wasted my life and do not know to what curse I am exposed."¹⁴

Finally, in December 1955, Congar was assigned to the Dominican house in Strasbourg where the community, as a way of showing their respect and support in the face of Rome's disciplinary action, promptly elected him as Prior. At that time the Roman authorities had no direct supervision over the election of Religious superiors. In this position he certainly had more personal freedom in preaching and lecturing and

¹² Ibid, 104.

¹³ Ibid, 102.

¹⁴ Ibid, 112.

communal support, but the cloud of suspicion still hung over him. Eventually, with the help of Archbishop Weber of Strasbourg he returned to Paris where he was able to resume his pastoral ministry and theological work. With the advent of Pope John XXIII in 1959 the climate of the Church changed drastically. As a teacher of church history at the diocesan seminary, Roncalli had been denounced anonymously by a priest of the diocese of Bergamo for his sympathy for certain authors who were *persona non grata* to the Roman curia. One of the first things the newly elected Pope did, one story has it, was to go directly to the Holy Office, take his file and write on it in large script: "I am not a heretic."

Congar's personal influence on the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was far-reaching from lecturing international groups of bishops to helping draft conciliar documents. In July, 1960 he was appointed as a theological consultant to preparatory commissions, national hierarchies and individual bishops, and was later made an official Council "peritus." Congar's hand can be discerned in almost every major document produced by the Council Fathers. Among major documents that bear his stamp are those on divine revelation, the Church, ecumenism, missionary activity, life and ministry and priests and religious freedom. Vatican II vindicated Congar and many other theologians including his friend Chenu who had been silenced or disciplined by Rome. The truths to which they witnessed in their theological explorations and reflections gradually became assimilated into mainstream Church teaching. Congar himself was made a Cardinal by Pope John Paul II in 1994 though, for reasons of health, he begged off from attending the consistory. He died the following year.

The road to such high ecclesiastical honors, which he never personally sought, however, was filled with much private pain and public humiliation. In the same 1956 moving letter to his mother mentioned earlier, he poured out his heart in writing about the toll that the silencing took on him personally: "Practically speaking, they have destroyed me as far as it was possible. Everything I believed and had worked on has been taken away... They have not, of course, hurt my body; nor have they touched my soul or forced me to do anything. But a person is not limited to his skin and his soul. When someone is a doctrinal apostle, he is his action, he is his friendships, he is his relationships, he is his social outreach; they have taken all that away from me. All that is now at a standstill, and in that way I have been profoundly wounded. They have reduced me to nothing and so they have for all practical purposes destroyed me. When, at certain times, I look back on everything I had hoped to be and to do, on what I had begun to do, I am overtaken by an immense heartsickness."¹⁵

Congar had a great appreciation for the virtue of patience and the role of the cross in the life of the would-be reformer which rings true even today: The cross is the condition of every holy work. God himself is at work in what to us seems a cross. Only by its means do our lives acquire a certain genuineness and depth... Only when a man has suffered for his conviction does he attain in them a certain force, a certain quality of the undeniable and, at the same time, the right to be heard and respected."¹⁶ In our own time a similar sentiment is reflected in the words of the Cardinal Prefect of Paul VI's newly-named Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the old "Holy Office" in Congar's time) who once said that suffering for the truth gives legitimacy to one's words.

Congar also appreciated the crucial role of history as it shapes the Church and its teachings over the ages: Congar believed that a knowledge of history was the best way to ensure confidence in the Church. "Acquiring knowledge of history," he wrote, "is the surest

¹⁵ Congar, "Silenced for Saying Things," 3.

¹⁶ Yves Congar, "Easter Hope," *National Catholic Reporter*, April 21, 2002, 5.

way of acquiring confidence in the church. History teaches that nothing is new and that the church has survived sadder and more difficult situations. History is a school of wisdom and of limitless patience."¹⁷ Sound advice especially for these times!

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¹⁷ Thomas O'Meara, "Raid on the Dominicans: The Repression of 1954," *America*, February 5, 1994, 16.