

Étienne DUPRÉ

## The SPIRITUS RECTOR of Roman Catholic Ecumenism: Yves Congar (1904–1995)

*Yves Congar was undoubtedly one of the most influential figures of the Roman Catholic theological renewal in the XX<sup>th</sup> century and played a prominent role in the legitimisation and promotion of the ecumenical movement in the Roman Catholic Church. His deep respect and thorough knowledge of his own tradition, as well as of the traditions of other Christian Churches, set an important example for a new generation of Roman Catholic theologians and scholars who attempted – and still attempt – to further the quest for unity between the Roman Catholic Church and other Churches of both the West and the East.*

### KNOCKING DOWN THE BUDDHAS

Yves CONGAR was born in 1904 in Sedan, northeast France. In his childhood, he was a first-hand witness to the horrors of the World War I, and under the influence of the suffering he saw during that time, he made a decision to become a doctor. He grew up in a deeply religious and patriotic family and as an adult he often remembered his mother's Saturday readings from the Gospel. In an incident that he used to mention with a smile on his lips, he also recalled how—when preparing for his First Communion together with his sister—he knocked down Buddha figures made of sand by his brothers at the back of their garden.

CONGAR's choice of the priestly vocation was later modified due to his visits to Benedictine monasteries in which he experienced authentic monastic life in spite of the critical state of the war-damaged premises in which the monks were living. In 1925 he joined the Order of Preachers

(Dominicans) at Amiens, and even before his ordination in 1930, he became aware of his personal vocation to work for the unity of the Christian Churches. He studied at Reims, Paris and Kain-latombe, where he attended courses and spiritual retreats led by renowned theologians such as Jacques MARITAIN, Reginald GARRIGOU-LAGRANGE and his later personal friend and advisor Marie-Dominique CHENU. CONGAR himself was later active as a pedagogue at the prestigious Dominican house of studies known as *Le Saulchoir*.

In 1937 he started an ecclesiological series entitled *Unam Sanctam*, and the first issue was CONGAR's ecumenical manifesto *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion*. This study proved to be an important milestone in Roman Catholic thinking about ecumenism and immediately attracted considerable attention.

CONGAR spent much of World War II as a prisoner of war in German captivity and after his return to France he became an active writer, known especially for his advocacy of Roman Catholic involvement in the ecumenical movement. The movement for Christian unity was, at that time, still viewed with much suspicion by the official structures of the Roman Catholic Church that regarded it as a dubious attempt at pan-Christian syncretism and feared the contamination of the Catholic doctrine.

In the post-war years, CONGAR continued his search for possible platforms of dialogue with other Christian denominations and



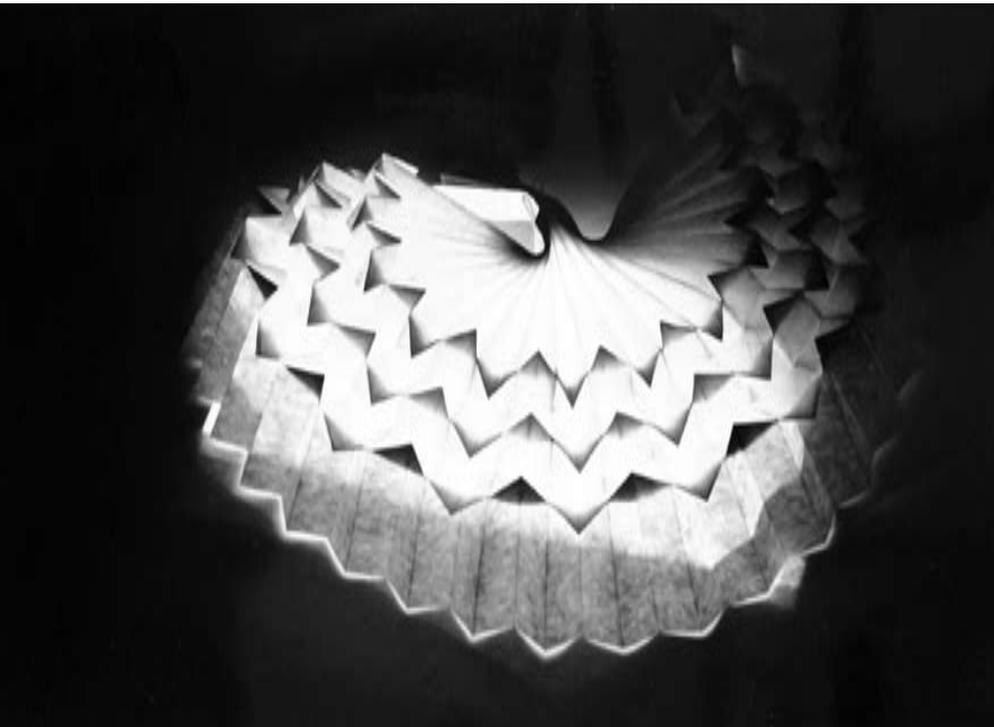
his struggle for an increased involvement of the Catholic laity in the life of the Church. The post-war years, however, proved to be the hardest time in CONGAR's life. Between 1946-1956, he was subject to a constant supervision by the Holy Office (the current Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith) and was repeatedly withheld permission to

publish his writings. Eventually he was subject to total censorship.

In the years following World War II the French Dominican was forced to leave France three times. He spent his exile first at the Dominican Biblical Institute in Jerusalem, then in Rome and in 1956 he was sent to Cambridge. His life reached a turning point in 1956 when, in December, he returned to France and the inimical attitude of the Roman curia slowly began to change. With the advent of the *aggiornamento*, proclaimed by the new Pope John XXIII, a significant renewal and re-orientation of the official Catholic *teologizare* took place. In 1960 CONGAR was appointed a consultant to the theological commission charged with the preparation of materials for the upcoming Second Vatican Council.

### THE SILENT MAN WITH A PIPE AT VATICAN II

Ecumenism became one of the key focusses of Vatican II and its importance grew steadily. Approximately forty delegates from different Christian Churches were invited to the opening of the Council and were allowed to follow the sessions as observers. This unprecedented novelty brought about much enthusiasm on the



part of theologians like CONGAR who had been trying for years to facilitate and encourage meetings of the Church officials at the highest level. In 1962 CONGAR's dream became reality. In his personal Council journal, CONGAR noted the atmosphere of warmth and love that surrounded events such as the common Scripture reading in the church of St. Paul's Outside the Walls, where three representatives of the Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Church communions read the Gospel together.

CONGAR participated actively in the preparation of the crucial declaration on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, which for the first time in the history of the Roman Catholic Church stated an official commitment of the Church to the common quest for Christian unity. Instead of promoting the old model of the return of the other Christian Churches to the only true Church embodied in the Roman Catholic Church, the document presented a new model of gradual *convergence* of the Churches. Under the

influence of theologians such as CONGAR, the texts of the Council re-oriented the attention from what *divides* the Churches to what already *unites* them, and further to what could unite them. One of the important shifts was that of rhetorics—searching for new ways of *talking about the other Churches*.

In earlier documents, non-Catholics were referred to as *heretics* or *amputated members* and a clear distinction between a voluntary leaving of the Church and a life-long affiliation to another Church or Community was missing. During Vatican II, the expressions *separated brethren* and *separated Churches* were used and were gradually replaced by *other Christians*, *others who have received Baptism* or *Christians of other Communities*. The change of language and vocabulary was not merely a cosmetic change. It was a consequence of an unequivocal change in attitudes on the part of the Roman Catholic Church. At Vatican II, the paradigm of dialogue was introduced and the

Catholics were openly encouraged to participate in the ecumenical movement. When reflecting on the heritage of the Churches of the East, *Unitatis Redintegratio* even admitted that in theological formulations concerning the revealed mystery these Churches can be in some areas complementary to the Roman Catholic Church. Thus a considerable appreciation has been given to various inputs of other Churches in the fields of theology, mission, etc.

One of the important consequences of the Second Vatican Council was the establishment of such organs as the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity or the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, whose aim is to ensure constant dialogue with other Churches and living faiths.

When the Second Vatican Council was approaching its end in 1965, Yves CONGAR stopped at the tomb of St. Paul and prayed for the unity of the Church. He recalls his prayer in this way: "I talk to him. I talk to him about Luther, who wanted to reaffirm 'the Gospel' for which Paul had struggled. I ask of him, I almost tell him he has an obligation . . . to intervene in this new stage, to guide the pope and us all."

The commitment to ecumenical dialogue that the Roman Catholic Church professed at Vatican II has been followed ever since. It is beyond doubt that CONGAR was among those who contributed the most to the launching of a new approach to the movement for Christian unity during the sessions of the Council. According to an anecdote, at the beginning of the Council he was still an unknown man to most of the bishops and thus he was referred to as "the silent man with a pipe." In 1994 "the silent man with a pipe" was made Cardinal by Pope JOHN PAUL II as a sign of recognition for his life-long struggle for the renewal of the Church and his visionary quest for the Christian unity.

#### Suggested reading

CONGAR Yves, *Called to Life*. Slough, 1988.  
 CONGAR Yves, *Chrétiens en dialogue*. Paris, 1964.  
 CONGAR Yves, *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église*. Paris, 1950.

FLYNN Gabriel (ed.), *Yves Congar, Theologian of the Church*. Louvain, 2005.  
 KOMONCHAK Joseph A., *Vatican II as Ecumenical Council: Yves Congar's Vision Realised*.

<http://www.jknirp.com/congar4.htm>

Étienne DUPRÉ (1975) was born in Toulouse and studied theology and arts in Paris. Since 1996 he has been in regular contact with the ecumenical community in Taizé. In 2000 he stayed in the Taizé community for a year. His main interests are theology, painting and liturgy. Currently he works in a design studio in Paris.