



Road Map for the Future

Teachings of Vatican II


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Vatican II (1962-1965) was one of the great moments in the history of our Church. It marked a time when the Church took a look at where it was and where the world was—and sought to close the gap. The Council wasn't a sudden event; years of changes in the world and years of study among Church leaders and theologians brought us all to this great moment.

Although Pope John XXIII (1958-1963) is rightly given credit for initiating the Second Vatican Council, the preparations for a council had been discussed for many years. But it was Pope John, a student of Church history with firsthand experience of the joys and troubles of the world, who brought the spirit of informed openness that so shaped Vatican II. And of course it is to the credit of his successor, Paul VI (1963-1978), that the Council moved forward following John's death.

It was the timing of that Council—at the dawn of satellite communications—that suddenly put the Church in touch with more of the world. Evangelizing possibilities were now greater than ever; but now, too, the world could look in on the Church and challenge it.

Today, 40 years later, we are still challenged by the work of the Council Fathers, the 2,860 bishops who drafted the Council's 16 documents. We've been through periods of experimentation, re-imagining who we are as Church. Some have decried the changes as too much, too fast; others have complained that the Church isn't changing fast enough.



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Then and Now: Vatican I (1869-70)

Vatican I is best summed up in two words: papal infallibility. Initially, Pope Pius IX wanted the Council to address various issues of the day such as Church-state relations, the lifestyle and morals of the clergy, the need for a universal catechism. But, from the start, the primacy and infallibility of the pope became the primary focus for the 800 Churchmen who gathered at the first council to be held in St. Peter's Basilica.

Up to 80 percent of them were "infallibilists" who supported the notion that the pope is incapable of error when speaking officially on matters of faith and morals. Others either opposed the idea outright or objected to the definition of the term. When the final vote came, however, it was 433-2. Immediately after, the two dissenting bishops joined the others in accepting the idea that the Holy Father exercises infallibility on specific occasions on behalf of and in communion with the Church. Ultimately, all bishops in the world gave their adherence.

Vatican I was suddenly suspended when Rome was invaded; sessions never resumed. Though the spiritual power of the papacy was strengthened at Vatican I, it left the relationship between the Holy Father and bishops unsettled and unclear.

It has been said that a Church council's vision is not realized until the third generation—two generations after those who held the Council. Our Church today includes adults of this third generation. Those who were at the Council or remember it are fewer and fewer. Those who were children during the Council are split between those who experienced strong Church formation and those whose faith formation was probably, at least initially, lacking in many basics. Many of those born in the mid-1960s and later struggle today to understand their faith in depth.

The momentum behind the Church's ongoing renewal is found in the teachings of Vatican II. It is found in a Church re-centered on the Gospels and the Eucharist and in constant dialogue with the world. Pope John Paul II said it best a few years ago: "The best preparation for the new millennium can only be expressed by a renewed commitment *to apply*, as faithfully as possible, the teachings of Vatican II to the life of every individual and of the whole Church" (*The Coming Third Millennium*, #20).

This 12-part series will look at the principal documents of the Council and give a report, of sorts, on our progress as Catholics. The Council documents provide a road map for our future; this series will explore our progress along that route. In this issue we take a broad look at some of the major trends that the Council initiated.

Ministry transformation

It's common today to see lay women and men assisting at Mass as eucharistic ministers. These and other lay liturgical ministers—ushers, greeters, lectors and music ministers—are visible reminders of the wide variety of laypeople who minister within the Church. Some serve as catechists or youth ministers, others as hospital chaplains, bereavement ministers, administrators of priestless parishes and outreach workers.

Behind this burgeoning lay involvement in ministry is the reality that more Catholics are embracing their baptismal call to ministry or service to the Catholic community and, indeed, to the world at large.



At the same time that the role of the laity is growing, we are experiencing a decline in the number of ordained ministers. The Holy Spirit is clearly leading us to a more inclusive model of Church in which we recognize the need for both lay and ordained ministers to make the work of the Church complete.

Women are among those becoming more engaged in Church ministry today, though many believe that their potential has not been fully realized. What full ministry for women should mean is a sensitive question requiring further discernment. Those awaiting greater acknowledgment in the Church also include ethnic minorities, Catholics with disabilities and many others whose gifts have not yet been fully respected or utilized.

Dynamic liturgies

The liturgical renewal that swept through the Church after Vatican II brought new life to the celebration of the Eucharist and other sacraments. New sacramental rites and the use of local languages encourage more full and active participation.

Before Vatican II, the priest celebrated

Mass in Latin with his back to the people, making the action of the Mass seem far away. It was easy for the faithful to fall into the role of spectators. Now the assembly is more actively engaged, helping us to experience “all of us” celebrating the Eucharist with the priest. Vatican II’s *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* urges “full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations” (#14).

The Church now stresses the communal dimension of all the sacraments, seeing them as “community events,” not private rituals. The RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) is a dramatic sign of this communal approach to the sacraments.

Before the RCIA was reestablished, the typical approach to adult Baptism was isolated from the parish community. Preparation often consisted of around six weeks of private instructions followed by Baptism on a Sunday afternoon, attended by a small cluster of relatives or friends.

Today, the RCIA process lasts a year or more and involves sponsors, catechists and, indeed, the whole parish. The Sacraments of Initiation—Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist—are celebrated within the context of community at the Easter Vigil. This spirit of communal involvement is also reflected in other sacraments.



New interest in Scripture

More Catholics are reading the Bible today—with more solid understanding—than at any other time in Church history. Growing numbers of lay women and men are attending theology schools, leading and/or joining Bible study groups and reading an array of solid articles or books on the subject. Priests and religious are no longer the only Scripture experts.

The Church today encourages its members to make use of new methods of Scripture study and to cherish the Scriptures. Catholics are growing in understanding of the Bible through the benefits of historical research, literary analysis and archaeological findings. Church documents wisely steer Catholics away from literal-minded approaches and from reading the Bible as if it were a science or history textbook.

Also of note is that, through the Lectionary’s three-year cycle, Catholics are now exposed to a wider variety of Scripture readings at Sunday Mass. The use of Scripture readings has been enhanced in other sacramental rites as well.

As Catholics are nourished by the life-giving word of God, they become better instruments of evangelization and of the world’s transformation.



Outreach to all humanity

One of the most warmly received insights of Vatican II is that salvation is concerned not solely with saving souls but also with saving the whole person—body and soul. This holistic view is appealing because we naturally do not want to lose any genuine part of our human experience. St. Irenaeus, often quoted at the time of the Second Vatican Council, captured this well: “The glory of God is the human person fully alive!”

Jesus’ mission on this earth was not only to free the human heart from sin, but also to free men and women from disease, oppression and everything that hinders their development as humans created by God and destined for eternal life. When we profess our belief in the resurrection of the body, this integral salvation is implied.

In *The Church in the Modern World*, the bishops of Vatican II acknowledged the intimate bond between the Church and all humanity. This great document begins: “The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.”

This conviction is evident in a new commitment to ecumenism as well as the acknowledgment of salvation outside of the Catholic Church (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, #15-16). In addition to his many heroic firsts in the ecumenical effort, Pope John Paul II powerfully expressed this attitude during his first visit to the United States in October 1979. His first words were: “I want to greet all Americans without distinction. I want to

tell everyone that the pope is your friend and a servant of your humanity.”

Every authentic dimension of human existence is to be saved and brought to wholeness. As the pope’s words suggest, we are to help all people come to their full humanity as men and women created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by Christ.



Growth of social justice

In 1983, the bishops of the United States issued *The Challenge of Peace*, a pastoral letter on war and peace. In it they discussed the morality of war and of

Getting Personal: Ladislav Orsy, S.J.

When Pope John XXIII announced in early 1959 his intention to call an ecumenical council, a young Jesuit priest named Ladislav Orsy was as surprised and puzzled as other Church-watchers were. Where, he wondered, would such a council take the Church, and what would its significance be? He waited for the answers at the nearby Gregorian University, where he was teaching canon law.

Today, decades later, Father Orsy, now 82, still has questions. “The further away we are from the Second Vatican Council, the more I am discovering its enormous significance and how much more we have to understand,” he told *Vatican 2 Today*. Just by calling a council and turning to the bishops for their insights and wisdom, Pope John reversed a trend toward centralized papal power that dated to the Council of Trent in the 16th century.

Now canon law professor at Georgetown University, Father Orsy sees the Council as “a turning point” in the history of the Church—one that will take “a long time to assimilate” and to fully appreciate in such areas as liturgy and the role of the laity. But he remains patient, and hopeful, that the “complex, complicated, beautiful vision of Vatican II” will be fully embraced in time.

nuclear weapons. To help Catholics form their consciences on economic matters, they issued a pastoral letter on the U.S. economy in 1986. More recently, in 1999 and again in 2003, the U.S. bishops addressed civic responsibility in the document *Faithful Citizenship*.

Conscientious Catholics are reading these and other statements that the bishops have published on political and social issues. Church leaders continue to encourage Catholics to let their hearts be guided by the “social gospel.”

Some people, however, are uncomfortable with the Church’s involvement in public issues. They criticize the Church for “meddling in politics.” Taking to heart the holistic view of salvation (discussed earlier) will help us see the mission of the Church as healing unjust political structures and laws as well as unjust hearts.

Martin Luther King, Jr., illustrated this point during a speech in 1964 when he said: “The law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me!” King helps us see that Christians must seek to transform not only sinful hearts but also the sinful laws and customs of society that oppress and dehumanize our sisters and brothers.

Catholic social teaching reminds us that it is not enough to passively await God’s Kingdom in the next life. We are also called to make that Kingdom present now, by working as God’s instruments to remove injustice, discrimination, poverty and disease from our midst.



A time of new growth

What is happening in our Church in these opening years of the third millennium? We are something like passengers in an airplane circling above the airport, waiting for the weather to clear so we can see to land.

What happened to the fast rate of change we experienced in those early years after the Council? The pace has certainly slowed. Church leaders seem to have decided that we need to take a break after so much turbulent change. We find ourselves in a time of consolidation and integration, taking stock of where we are.

One might compare the Church to someone experiencing an identity crisis or confusing personal change. Such individuals need time to reflect and “get their act together” before moving on. Maybe the Church leaders sense that it is time for the Church to catch up with itself—to step back a bit and put all the pieces of our fragmented vision into a new whole. This need was satisfied to some degree with the issuing of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, but our Vatican II pilgrimage must always move forward.

No matter how carefully we try to put all the truths of the Church into an orderly arrangement, we know that we must remain open to new questions needing new answers and to new challenges of growth from the Holy Spirit. Surely new roads lie before us! **V2T**

A New Language

signs of the times: a motto of Vatican II rooted in the Church as sacrament, a visible sign of Jesus in the world. Pope John XXIII believed the Church must change as the world changes. Related is **aggiornamento**, Italian for “updating.” It refers to the spiritual renewal and institutional reform the Council sought to bring about.

ecumenical council: a meeting of the pope and the world’s bishops (ecumenical is from the Greek for “universal”) to make decisions for the Church in matters of faith, morals, worship and discipline. The pope always presides over ecumenical councils and must confirm and promulgate decisions for them to be binding.

V2T Question Box

- What change in the Church since the Second Vatican Council gives you the most encouragement about the Church’s future? If you lived through the changes, what was most difficult for you?
- How closely does the Vatican II vision of Church match yours? In what ways does the Church need to grow in order to continue embracing and working toward the vision set forth by the Council Fathers?
- What can you do to help keep the vision of Vatican II alive in your local Church community?

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