

# **A Look at Three of the Most Significant Religious Events in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century—The Second Vatican Council: Change and Continuity in the Catholic Synthesis**

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No one can debate that the Second Vatican Council was one of the most significant religious events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, if for no other reason because this event has affected all Roman Catholics in the world, and that involves a lot of people. Within the last year, the official number of Catholics worldwide passed the one billion mark.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, membership in the Catholic Church at the end of 1998 was reported as 61.5 million, 22.7 per cent of the total population,<sup>2</sup> which is about the same number as all those worldwide who call themselves Lutherans. More locally, the archdiocese of Milwaukee counts over 680,000 Catholics in Southeastern Wisconsin, more than double the number of all WELS members in North America. We might consider one more statistic that Catholics themselves often mention somewhat tongue-in-cheek when speaking about their numbers in the United States. That is, Catholics make up the largest religious denomination in the country, while inactive Catholics make up the second largest denomination, estimated to be anywhere between 15 and 20 million. The sheer demographics alone would tell us that Catholic presence and influence is certainly felt in our society and culture, including among us in the WELS.

You can ask any group of WELS people virtually anywhere in the country, “How many of you have relatives, neighbors, friends, or coworkers who are Roman Catholics? Raise your hand.” And they will all raise their hands. Our members are married to Catholics, related to Catholics, live in the same neighborhoods as Catholics, work with Catholics, and are good friends with Catholics. Because of the demographics and perhaps also because of other reasons, people of Catholic background probably represent a fairly high percentage of the people who join our congregations by adult confirmation. Probably only other kinds of Lutherans make up a higher percentage of non-transferring new members. For such reasons as these we will want to have more than just a superficial knowledge of modern Roman Catholicism. We cannot understand modern Catholicism and Catholics today without a knowledge of Vatican II and the affect it has had on Catholics over the past 35 years.

## **Conception of the council**

The Second Vatican Council was conceived in the mind of one man, Angelo Roncalli, Pope John XXIII. Elected pope on October 28, 1958, Roncalli had been pope for less than 90 days, when he called a meeting of 17 cardinals on January 25, 1959 in Rome. There he announced his plans. He was going to call an ecumenical or general council of the Holy Roman Catholic Church, the first general council in almost one hundred years, the second in only four centuries.

The reaction of the cardinals present at the meeting is worth mentioning. Normal Vatican protocol and propriety requires that when the pope makes significant official statements and announcements that those present show their approval with polite applause. The reaction of the cardinals to Pope John’s announcement was ... nothing. They just sat there in silence, stunned by the completely unexpected announcement.<sup>3</sup> The pope

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Vatican publication *Annuario Pontificio*, reported in Catholic World News Service, Vatican Update, February 22, 1999. Available at [cwnews.com](http://cwnews.com).

<sup>2</sup> As reported in the *1999 Catholic Almanac* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1998), p. 435.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Giuseppe Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, Vol. I. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), pp. 1-3. According to Alberigo, the only record of the reaction of the cardinals to the Pope’s announcement was made by Roncalli himself in his personal diary, which was published posthumously. Cf. Also Joseph A. Komonchak, “Convening Vatican II: John XXIII Calls for a Council”, *Commonweal*, February 12, 1999, pp. 10, 11. Concerning the cardinals stunned silence, the pope noted in his diary that no doubt the cardinals were overcome with such a surprised joy that was too intense for words. (Perhaps the pope was trying to be “evangelical” in his remarks.)

seems to have conferred with no one about his plans, so his announcement came as a surprise to all, Catholics and non-Catholics alike. The announcement came as a surprise for a second reason: Roncalli was already 77 years old when the cardinals elected him pope, so he was not expected to have a long or significant reign. It was assumed that Pope John would be only a transitional pope with a relatively brief reign, after the 19-year reign of Pope Pius XII (1939-1958).

As the word spread of the pope's announcement, reactions from bishops around the world were mixed. Some bishops were elated. Others clearly were not. Many Catholics, including clergy, were just plain puzzled by the announcement. Why a council? For what purpose? Historically, ecumenical or general councils were usually called when the church was facing some grave danger, some crisis of some sort. There was no great crisis confronting the church at this time, no great heresy requiring an ecumenical council to respond definitively. So most Catholics didn't see any need for a general council at this time. The thinking was, everyone knew what it meant to be a Catholic. The church was strong under Pius XII; it had many priests. In many countries like the United States, attendance at Mass and participation in the sacraments were high. What's more, many Catholics thought that there would never be any further need for a general council, since Vatican I had decreed in 1870, at Pope Pius IX's insistence, that the pope is infallible when he speaks *ex cathedra* as the supreme pastor of the church concerning matters of faith and morals.

### **Purpose of the council**

Pope John's reasons for calling the council and what his agenda was for the council began to become clear only gradually in the months following his announcement. In various speeches he began to spell out what his vision was for the council. The purpose, the pope said, was not to define any new doctrines or condemn any old heresies; it was not to be a "dogmatic" council, as past councils such as Trent and Vatican I had been but a "pastoral" council. The story is told that on one occasion when the pope was meeting with some journalists in the Vatican and they asked the pope what the purpose of the council was, he went over to a window, opened it, and said, "We are going to let some fresh air into the Church."<sup>4</sup> A key word that Pope John used for this purpose of the council was the Italian *aggiornamento*, renewal, updating.

But just what needed updating and why? As Pope John looked at the modern world, he saw how many things had changed in this century, while at the same time many of the church's viewpoints and ways of doing things had not changed much in many centuries. The result was that in many countries where the Catholic Church had once been a major influence in society, culture, morality, and government it was now becoming more and more marginalized. It was Pope John's wish to bring the bishops of the world together to look at the religious, cultural, and economic situations in the world and try to find ways for the church to fit better into the modern world.

Skipping ahead chronologically to his opening speech at the beginning of the council, October 11, 1962, we hear the pope further spell out his vision for the council and how the church should renew itself so that it would be better equipped to carry out its mission in the modern world. (All emphases have been added.)

It is but natural that in opening this Universal Council *we should like to look to the past and to listen to its voices*, whose echo we like to hear in the memories and the merits of *the more recent and ancient Pontiffs*, our predecessors. These are solemn and venerable voices, throughout the East and the West, from the fourth century to the Middle Ages, and from there to modern times, which have handed down their witness to those Councils....

Illuminated by the light of this Council, the Church—we confidently trust—will become greater in spiritual riches and, gaining the strength of new energies therefrom, she will look to the future without fear. In fact, *by bringing herself up to date* where required, and by the wise organization of mutual

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<sup>4</sup> The story was related by Hans Kung in a televised interview that was included in the video series *The Faithful Revolution, Vatican II* (Vatican II Productions, Lyrick Studios, 1997).

cooperation, the Church will make men, families, and peoples really turn their minds to heavenly things....

The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more efficaciously....

Our duty is not only to guard this precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our era demands of us pursuing thus the path which the Church has followed for twenty centuries.

The salient point of this Council is not, therefore, a discussion of one article or another of the fundamental doctrine of the Church which has repeatedly been taught by the Fathers and by ancient and modern theologians, and which is presumed to be well known and familiar to all.

For this a Council was not necessary. But from the renewed, serene, and tranquil adherence to all the teaching of the Church in its entirety and preciseness, as it still shines forth in the Acts of the Council of Trent and First Vatican Council, the Christian, Catholic, and apostolic spirit of the whole world expects a step forward toward a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciousness in faithful and perfect conformity to *the authentic doctrine, which however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.* And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary, everything being measured in the forms and proportions of a *magisterium which is predominantly pastoral in character*....

The Church has always opposed ... errors. Frequently she has condemned them with the greatest severity. *Nowadays, however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnation.*

That being so, the Catholic Church, raising the torch of religious truth by means of this Ecumenical Council, desires to show herself to be the loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of mercy and goodness toward the brethren who are separated from her.<sup>5</sup>

Pope John had highlighted a number of themes and issues he wanted the council to address. Principally, the purpose of the council was to initiate a church-wide renewal, to bring the church up to date, not by rejecting its heritage but by re-examining it, paying particular attention to and adhering to past papal teaching. The purpose of the council was not to change any of the church's doctrines; nevertheless, "*the authentic doctrine ... should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.*" Clearly the kind of updating that Pope John had in mind involved considerably more than just relaxing rules concerning fasting and the style of habits that nuns had to wear. What the pope was proposing was—certainly it would turn out to be quite revolutionary: not a change in doctrine *per se* but a change in what I call the Catholic synthesis.

What am I referring to? A synthesis, of course, is the blending together of two or more parts or elements, which results in something new. Applied to human thought, a synthesis occurs when two or more ideas or systems of thought, be they complimentary or divergent, are combined—united—resulting in a new idea or system of thought. In the history of Christian thought, probably the greatest synthesizer of all was Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274), whose *Summa Theologica* represents a synthesis of Bible teaching, Tradition (decrees of popes and church councils, canon law, church fathers), and the philosophy of Aristotle.

The medieval scholastic theologians, like Peter Lombard, Bonaventure, Aquinas, and others, all felt the need to work out such a synthesis for at least two reasons. First, like many of the early church fathers, they held an overly optimistic view of fallen human nature. They failed to come to grips fully with what the Bible teaches

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<sup>5</sup> Pope John's Opening Speech to the Council, *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, general editor (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 710-716.

about total depravity, that in the fall of Adam mankind lost the holy image of God. Man's mind, his intellect, became totally spiritually corrupt, ignorant of the true God and hostile to God and his will, as Scripture teaches. "The mind of sinful man is death.... The sinful mind is hostile to God" (Ro 8:6,7). "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritual discerned" (I Co 2:14). As a result of their flawed anthropology, these theologians were convinced that human philosophy had a positive contribution to make in discovering and expounding Christian teaching, and so they incorporated-synthesized-it into the Christian Tradition.

Second, the medieval scholastic theologians were aware that there were divergent, contradictory theological opinions among the church fathers (the received Christian Tradition). A significant part of the scholastics' theological work involved trying to harmonize one church father's views with another, and then also with Aristotle, and, of course, with Scripture-often by allegorizing it. For all the energy spent at allegorizing, harmonizing, and speculating-synthesizing-not surprisingly the medieval church experienced a good deal of theological pluralism. Entire monastic orders lined up with various individual scholastics and their theological systems, such as the Dominicans with Thomas Aquinas and the Franciscans with Bonaventure. Add to these the nominalists; and the Scotists. In spite of the theological pluralism, all were "good Catholics," as long as what they debated were "open questions" and not matters that had been solemnly defined by popes or church councils.

We are all aware of what a corruption and perversion of the gospel resulted from the medieval Catholic synthesis-rampant rationalism, legalism, and externalism. Any synthesis of the revealed gospel of God with any system of human thought always results in "a different gospel-which is really no gospel at all" (Gal 1:6,7).

Then came Luther and the Reformation. The restoration of the pure preaching of the scriptural gospel of Jesus Christ meant the repudiation of the medieval Catholic synthesis. No more salvation by grace *and* (fallen human) nature but *sola gratia*. No more faith *and* works as the way to being right with God but *sola fide*. No more Christ *and* Mary and the saints and the hierarchical priesthood as mediators between sinners and an angry God but *solus Christus*. No more Scripture *and* pluralistic Tradition and human reason as the source of Christian verity but *sola Scriptura*.

And then came the formal response of the Roman Church and all who followed in her wake: the Council of Trent (1545-1563). At Trent several things happened that we should mention besides the papal church's hardening against the gospel by its solemn cursing of the Reformation *solas*. The basic medieval Catholic synthesis was reaffirmed, while leaving unresolved much of the theological pluralism of the past (one of the few new teachings dogmatically defined at Trent was the canonicity of the Old Testament Apocrypha). Biblical humanism, however, which had also been a significant Catholic movement of that era, was rejected as part of the Catholic synthesis because it was too closely associated with the Reformation. Among the various church reforms that the Tridentine fathers legislated, we see a two-fold emphasis. In an effort to close ranks against the Protestants, an emphasis was placed on uniformity of outward forms-one order of worship in one language (sacramentary) and one order of monastic prayer (breviary)-where before there had been a multiplicity of outward forms. A second emphasis or trend we see coming out of the Tridentine reforms was that outward conformity was defined as conformity with the church of Rome, with church government and decision-making becoming more and more consolidated and centralized in the papacy.

The Council of Trent set the tone and pattern which the Catholic Church would adopt toward just about everything non-Roman for the next four hundred years. Non-Catholics were regarded as schismatics (Eastern Orthodox) or heretics (Protestants), who were to be converted, and if they refused to be converted, it was the God-given responsibility of the temporal rulers to suppress them. Non-Catholic teachings were to be refuted and condemned. The Inquisition flourished during and after the 16<sup>th</sup> century as the preferred means of dealing with recalcitrant heretics. At the same time that the Roman Church was adopting a defensive and hostile posture toward whatever was non-Roman, it also fostered a triumphalist, virulent missionary spirit. The Roman Church claimed to be the visible kingdom of God on earth. It was the perfect society, as the Jesuit theologian Robert Bellarmine and others called it. With its visible sacerdotal hierarchy, sacramental system, and canon law, the

Catholic Church was holy; it was complete. So was its synthesis, with Thomas Aquinas and the scholastic method serving as the theological model for all teachers of the church to follow.

During the ensuing centuries, it wasn't only Reformation teaching toward which the Roman Church adopted a hostile posture. With the coming of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, new philosophical winds began to blow all over Europe—the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on the autonomy of the individual and its exaltation of reason over any external authority (including divine revelation and church Tradition). Rome took a defensive position over against the Enlightenment, condemning its tenets as anti-Catholic. The same was true of scientific naturalism and Darwinism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The modern democratic forms of government that grew out of the Enlightenment were also condemned by the popes, in particular the notion of freedom of individual conscience and the right to religious freedom. The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought more “isms” to condemn, fascism and atheistic communism especially. Rome's way of dealing with any and all forms of liberalism and modernity was to condemn them and to censor anyone within its fold who tried to promote them.

One other “ism” the popes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century condemned: ecumenism. Any and all invitations from various Protestant groups to join in ecumenical dialogues were rebuffed. Rome would not participate in any such endeavor where she would be regarded as a mere equal partner with Protestant churches.

I don't think it would be too much of a generalization to say that the Catholic synthesis—at least as Rome promoted it—did not change all that much since the time of Trent. That doesn't mean that the popes weren't at times defining new dogmas.<sup>6</sup> It doesn't mean either that individual Catholics weren't suggesting different approaches to theological questions than the scholastic-dogmatic approach. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while most Catholics still approached theology from a non-historical dogmatical point of view, individuals like John Henry Newman in England and Johann Adam Moehler in Bavaria were beginning to think historically within the Catholic framework. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Catholic philosophers like Maurice Blondel in France were taking into account the more recent philosophies and attempting to incorporate them into the Catholic synthesis. Several other examples could be cited. All were regarded by the Vatican with suspicion, at least initially. Some were condemned and disciplined, especially during the so-called Modernist Controversy at the time when Pius X was pope (1903-1914).

Between the two world wars and again after World War II, there was a budding and flowering of several new movements within the Catholic Church, especially in the countries that border the Rhine River. These movements included the liturgical movement, which sought to rediscover and implement worship principles and forms of the ancient church, including lay participation and use of the vernacular. The modern biblical studies movement emphasized scholarly Scripture study and attempted to orientate Catholic theology more towards an historical (and critical!) approach to Scripture. In papal encyclicals Pius XII gave both of these movements official nods of papal approval. Another significant movement of the time did not fare so well under Pius XII but would be largely exonerated under John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. I am referring to the so-called “new theology,” which was developed by theologians such as the German Karl Rahner, the Swiss Hans Urs Von Balthasar and the French Louis Bouyer, Yves Congar, and Henri de Lubac. The “new theology” attempted to incorporate more modern philosophies into the Catholic synthesis, such as that of the rationalist Immanuel Kant and the existentialist Martin Heidegger. Because of these philosophical influences, we might think of these theologians in some respects as Catholic counterparts of such Protestant neo-orthodox theologians as Barth, Brunner, the Niebuhrs, and others. While these proponents of the “new theology” made use of orthodox Catholic sounding terms and concepts, their interaction with modern philosophy caused them to “reinterpret” the old concepts as something different from what the terms and concepts originally meant. For example, while all of these theologians would speak of the “inspiration” of Scripture, they didn't mean the same thing by it that the church had historically taught according to 2 Timothy 3:15 and other Scripture passages. A new Catholic synthesis was brewing.

All of the Catholic theologians mentioned were censored or disciplined in one way or another by the Vatican under Pius XII for their innovative teachings. But by the time the Second Vatican Council convened,

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<sup>6</sup> The Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption (1950) were defined in this period.

most of these theologians were among the council *periti*, the theological experts invited by the pope himself or individual bishops to serve as official (although non-voting) theological advisers to the council fathers. Several of these theologians played significant roles in drafting the official documents of Vatican II.

While we are speaking of the theological experts invited to the council as official advisors, three other names bear mentioning because of the notoriety they would receive during the council and the years following: Hans Kung, Edward Schillebeeckx (sic), and Joseph Ratzinger, all young university professors of theology at the time. Kung and Schillebeeckx, as you probably know, fell out of favor with the Vatican in the years after the council and eventually were disciplined and censored because they went too far in trying to incorporate modern thought into the Catholic synthesis (denying papal infallibility, denying the historical Jesus, etc.). Ratzinger, on the other hand, although he was also considered a theological progressive during the years of the council, backed away from the more radical positions that Kung, Schillebeeckx, and others began espousing by the end of the council. In 1977 Paul VI promoted Ratzinger to be the archbishop of Munich. He was further promoted by John Paul II in 1980 to be the cardinal prefect for the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the highest doctrinal watchdog of the Catholic Church, second only to the pope), a position he still holds.

### **Preparations for the council**

Pope John set in motion the preparations for the council by soliciting from all the Catholic bishops in the world their opinions on various subjects that might be discussed at the council. An ante-preparatory commission was set up to organize the voluminous material that was submitted by the bishops. By May 1960, the pope took the next step of setting up 12 commissions, comprising 871 people in all, headed up by the central commission, of which the pope was a member. The 11 other commissions prepared documents, called schemata, on a variety of subjects. The central commission approved seventy schemata (totaling over 2,000 pages), of which seven were sent to the bishops the July before the council began.

Regarding the makeup of the preparatory commissions, the pope was determined that they include bishops from all over the world and not just members of the Roman curia. At the same time, the curia, made up mostly but not entirely, of conservative-minded men, did everything it could to frame the schemata in as theologically traditional ways as possible.

### **A few highlights of the council sessions**

The Second Vatican Council officially opened on October 11, 1962, which, not by coincidence, was the feast of the divine Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The council began with a lengthy procession through St. Peter's Square of all 2,500 bishops, archbishops, and cardinals present, all vested in full regalia. The pope was carried, as was still customary at the time, on his gestatorial throne, wearing his triple-crowned golden tiara. We might mention that near the end of the long processional line was the young auxiliary bishop of Krakow, Poland, Karol Wojtyla (voy-TEE-wah), who later would become Pope John Paul II.

Time allows us to be only extremely sketchy in describing the events of the council itself.<sup>7</sup> The council was divided into four sessions:

First session: October 11 to December 8, 1962

Second session: September 29 to December 4, 1963

Third session: September 14 to November 21, 1964

Fourth session: September 14 to December 8, 1965.

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<sup>7</sup> What will most likely be the definitive history of Vatican II is currently being written and is being published simultaneously in several languages. Cf. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komanchak, *History of Vatican II*, 5 vols. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997- ). Although much more modest in scope, another valuable history of the council, in one volume, is Ralph M. Wiltgen's *The Rhine Flows into the Tiber: A History of Vatican II* (Rockford, Illinois: TAN Books and Publishers, reprinted 1985).

Tony Spina, a Catholic layman who served as an official photographer of the council, describes some of the mundane procedures of the daily meetings of the council:

Outwardly the trappings of the Second Vatican Council were much like those of any modern parliament. There were microphones and loud speakers—each chair was equipped with an electronic listening device; there were punched cards for each participant to register his vote, and electronic machines to interpret the cards and count the votes. There were secretaries trained to catch every word of the unfamiliar Latin spoken with the accents of every corner of the earth....

Journalists from the beginning of the council characterized the opposing forces as “conservative” and “liberal.” These terms were unfortunate, because they have a political connotation that is misleading and in fact has no relevance here. Articles found their way into political and popular magazines interpreting the debates of the council in quasi-political terms, as though this were indeed a political convention. It would be more nearly correct to refer to the opposing forces as the traditional and the non-traditional, for the gulf that separated them was often a question of whether to cling to the old norms or to redefine and reinvest the old truths with new clothing.<sup>8</sup>

A further comment might be made regarding the traditional/conservative versus nontraditional/progressive views held by various council fathers. Most, but not all, of the cardinals in the Roman curia were conservative, with Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, head of the Holy Office, serving as one of their main leaders and spokesmen. The conservatives had resisted Pope John’s vision of the council since the day he announced it. They wanted to maintain the status quo in the church as much as possible and viewed the council’s purpose as only to reaffirm Catholic dogma and to condemn old heresies, as well as any new ones. The conservatives were adamantly opposed to Pope John’s call for ecumenical dialogue with other Christians. A notable exception to the hard-line stance of most of the curial members was Cardinal Augustin Bea. Cardinal Montini of Milan (the future Pope Paul VI) was considered a progressive bishop, open to change, as also was Wojtyla of Krakow. Among other notable progressive bishops were most of the hierarchy from France, Germany, Austria, and the Low Countries. The progressives favored, among other things, modernizing the liturgy and other church ceremonial, engaging in the ecumenical movement, and decentralizing church governance by taking some power away from the curia and giving more power to the bishops.

One of the most significant council events happened on the first full day of council business. The progressive, reformed-minded bishops from the Rhineland region had organized into what became known as the European Alliance and were able to convince a majority of the council fathers to reject the slate of candidates for the council commissions (somewhat analogous to our synod convention floor committees), which the curia had packed with conservative-minded bishops. In the following days, the council fathers elected their own slate of candidates as commission members, now with many reformed-minded bishops also on the commissions. Having noted this, however, we would be giving the wrong impression if we implied that the progressive forces got their way on everything in the council. Such was hardly the case. As the council proceeded, both conservative and progressive influences were substantial, so that the resulting documents of the council are filled with the language of compromise.

Certainly another significant event of the council worth mentioning was the change of popes in 1963, in between the first and second sessions. John XXIII died in June of 1963, at which time, according to Vatican rules, the council was suspended until a new pope was elected, who would then decide whether to reconvene the council or not. Montini of Milan, seen as a moderate progressive, was elected pope. He reconvened the council almost immediately, promising to carry forward Pope John’s vision for church renewal and reform. Montini saw the council through to its completion with the fourth session ending with a solemn Mass on

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<sup>8</sup> Tony Spina, *The Pope and the Council* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1963), p. 97.

December 8, 1965, which is (again not coincidentally) the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

### Documents of the council

What did Vatican II accomplish for the Catholic Church? Answers vary among Catholics, depending largely on the responder's own theological persuasion. In spite of the varying answers, all are agreed on a number of points. Very concretely the council produced 16 documents, all promulgated by the pope, which gives them the highest authority in the church. The documents are as follows:

#### Constitutions

LG	<i>Lumen Gentium</i>	Dogmatic Constitution on the Church
DV	<i>Dei Verbum</i>	Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation
SC	<i>Sacrosanctum Concilium</i>	Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy
GS	<i>Gaudium et Spes</i>	Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Decrees

#### Decrees

CD	<i>Christus Dominus</i>	Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church
PO	<i>Presbyterorum Ordinis</i>	Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests.
OT	<i>Optatam Totius</i>	Decree on the Training of Priests
PC	<i>Perfectae Caritatis</i>	Decree on the Up-to date Renewal of Religious Life
AA	<i>Apostolicam Actuositatem</i>	Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People
AG	<i>Ad Gentes Divinitus</i>	Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity
UR	<i>Unitatis Redintegratio</i>	Decree on Ecumenism
OE	<i>Orientalium Ecclesiarum</i>	Decree on the Catholic Eastern Churches
IM	<i>Inter Mirifica</i>	Decree on the Mass Media

#### Declarations

DH	<i>Dignitatis Humanae</i>	Declaration on Religious Liberty
GE	<i>Gravissimum Educationis</i>	Declaration on Christian Education

The documents of Vatican II comprise a book of about 600 to 700 pages, about the size of the *Book of Concord*. Catholics do not regard the documents as divinely inspired, like the Bible, but they do hold that the Holy Spirit guided the council in writing the documents. As such, Catholics view these documents as providing the authoritative, broad-based agenda for their church well into the future, perhaps until the time of another general council, a Vatican III, if you will.

### Key teachings of the council

What are the basic teachings of Vatican II? Did Vatican II change any doctrines in the Catholic Church? Because the council documents are written in the language of compromise, reflecting the theological pluralism of the bishops, it is difficult to answer such questions in a simple way. Time allows us to offer only some highlights. Even then, we have to be selective.

From the perspective of most Roman Catholics, probably the most significant teachings or outcomes of Vatican II were the updating and revising of the church's liturgy, the emphasis it placed on the laity, and ecumenism.

In retrospect, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, seems rather conservative in the way it advocates liturgical reform. The cautious tone, no doubt, reflects the compromise nature of the document. For instance, it did not mandate the change from Latin to the vernacular in worship language but merely allowed for the vernacular to be used along with retaining some Latin in the liturgy. The



actual reform of the liturgy, however, ended up completely eclipsing what the council document called for. The result was that almost overnight Latin disappeared as a liturgical language, and all kinds of liturgical experimentation began (much of considered “illegitimate,” because it wasn’t done according to the Vatican’s rules and or with its permission).

The change to the vernacular in the liturgy allowed for another emphasis which the council called for: “the full and active participation by all the people” (SC 14).<sup>9</sup> It isn’t an overstatement to say that the Tridentine Mass allowed for no active participation by the laity. The old Mass was performed by the officiating priest in Latin for the people, not with them. In a Low Mass the dialogue of the Mass was spoken between the priest and an altar server, with the entire Canon spoken inaudibly so that even those who understood Latin could not hear it. In a High Mass, the dialogue of the Mass was chanted between priest and clerical or monastic choir. In both cases, the congregation did not participate at all. The new Mass was quite revolutionary for most Catholics, to say the least, but also quite welcomed by many.

With the change in worship language also came changes in styles of service music. While *Sacrosanctum Concilium* called for retaining Gregorian chant in the liturgy (SC 116), Gregorian chant also disappeared as quickly as did the Latin. Even such a holdout as the Gregorian Institute of America recognized the sign of the times, and in 1968 it changed its name to G.I.A. and began publishing and promoting liturgical music in contemporary American folk and other styles. Along with the change in language, the Mass and other rites have been revised by streamlining and simplifying them from what they had been. The result is that Catholics now worship in a way that has a look and feel that is much closer to our Lutheran worship than what the Tridentine rites were. Vatican II also called for a revision of the lectionary in a way that would incorporate more of Scripture into the lectionary. The result was the three-year lectionary, which most non-Catholic liturgical churches have also adapted to suit their needs. The church calendar was also somewhat modified. Many of the saints’ days were dropped in a conscious effort to make the calendar more Christocentric in its focus.

The liturgical reforms of Vatican II have led to viewing the Mass not only as a propitiatory sacrifice but now also emphasizing it as a communal meal. However, an understanding of the Supper as an evangelical means of grace still seems to be as absent as it ever was.

Certainly one of the other significant liturgical reforms was to allow for Communion in both kinds once again. Catholic parishes were allowed at first to offer both kinds only at special occasions, such as first Communion. Presently, many parishes, at least in the United States, offer both kinds in every Sunday Eucharist. While we certainly rejoice that both kinds are now offered again after over 700 years of “Babylonian captivity,” let us also recognize that the reason Catholics are now allowed to receive both kinds is not because of Christ’s institution and the inspired apostolic Word regarding both kinds (1 Co 10: 16; 11:23-29), but only because the papal magisterium has sanctioned it. Other changes in Communion practices which have come about as a result of Vatican II include doing away with Communion rails and kneeling while communing, and the option of receiving Communion with the hand while standing.

Regarding the *role of the laity*, as a result of Vatican II Catholic laypeople are allowed and encouraged to take a more active role in parish life than they had previously. Laypeople, both men and women, commonly now serve as Communion assistants, lectors, catechists, and parish administrators. Behind these outward reforms lies Vatican II’s change in emphases in Catholic ecclesiology. The old way of looking at the church emphasized the church as a perfect society, constituted by the divinely instituted hierarchy. The model looked like a pyramid, with the pope at the top, followed by cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests, religious, and finally laypeople way at the bottom. Vatican II reaffirmed all of the unbiblical aspects of Catholic ecclesiology. The church is still called a visible society, with the pope still at the top by divine institution (LG 8,14). The pope and the bishops retain for themselves the power of the keys (LG 18-23). And monasticism, with its “evangelical counsels” (vows of perpetual celibacy, poverty, and obedience), is still described as a special way of achieving holiness (LG 43,44). Nevertheless, when the council fathers came to drafting the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, they rejected the original schema that had been prepared by the

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<sup>9</sup> *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, Austin Flannery, general editor (Northport, New York: 1996).

conservative members of the curia, which described the church in only the traditional way as the perfect visible society, etc. The new emphasis found in *Lumen Gentium* begins with describing the church with a very biblical sounding concept: the people of God—all of them—constitute the church, not just or mainly pope, bishops, priests, and religious. What's more, *Lumen Gentium* declared that laypeople in their secular callings in life also can achieve genuine holiness. In other words, one doesn't have to become a priest, monk, or nun first in order to achieve holiness. While such shifts in emphasis in the Catholic synthesis don't represent substantive changes in doctrine, they certainly were considered revolutionary changes in the thinking of Catholics thirty years ago.

The model of the church somewhat favored by Vatican II, the people of God, also served as the theological framework for the new posture Catholicism would take toward *ecumenism*. Defining the Christian church as the people of God allowed for a broader view of the church than one that includes only Roman Catholics. The council stated that the people of God could be found outside of the Roman Church (UR 3). Eastern Orthodox and Protestants are no longer spoken of as schismatics and heretics but as "separated brethren" (UR 1), who have "a right to be called Christians" (UR 3). *Unam Sanctam* (13 02) clearly has been "reinterpreted." The Decree on Ecumenism further concedes: "[The Eastern Orthodox Churches], although separated from us, yet possess true sacraments, above all by apostolic succession, the priesthood and the Eucharist, whereby they are still joined to us in closest intimacy. Therefore some worship in common (*communicatio in sacris*), given suitable circumstances and the approval of Church authority, is not merely possible but is encouraged" (UR 15). The churches of the Reformation don't fare quite so well. They aren't even recognized as "churches" but only as "ecclesial communities" because "they have not preserved the proper reality of the eucharistic mystery in its fullness, especially because of the absence of the Sacrament of Orders" (UR 22). Rome does however, now recognize the validity of the Sacrament of Baptism when administered in Reformation churches according to Christ's institution (UR 22).

Although Vatican II made such and other concessions for the purpose of promoting ecumenical dialogue with other churches, it still maintains:

Nevertheless, our separated brethren, whether considered as individuals or as communities and Churches, are not blessed with that unity which Jesus Christ wished to bestow on all those to whom he has given new birth into one body, and whom he has quickened to newness of life—that unity which the Holy Scriptures and the ancient Tradition of the Church proclaim. *For it is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help towards salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained.* It was to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, that we believe that Our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant, in order to establish on earth the one Body of Christ into which all those should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the people of God. (UR 3, emphasis added)

Ecumenical-minded Protestant churches have regarded this shift in emphasis in Catholic ecclesiology as a great breakthrough for ecumenical dialogue with Roman Catholics. As we are all aware, Vatican II made it possible for the Catholic Church to become a major force in the modern ecumenical movement.

For a response to Vatican II's teachings on the church, I would refer you to an essay written by August Pieper, "Luther's Doctrine of Church and Ministry," written in 1917. Although written long before Vatican II, Pieper's essay is, in my opinion, one of the most insightful analyses of the Roman Catholic teaching on church and ministry that I have ever read. Pieper goes beyond the superficial and gets to the real substance of the Roman teaching versus the biblical, Lutheran teaching on church and ministry. Every word of what Pieper wrote over eighty years ago, I believe, still remains valid today. We offer a brief portion of Pieper's analysis of Rome's teaching on church and ministry:

Let us not be deceived in this: the natural man will more readily find the papal doctrinal system, the doctrine of the church as well as the doctrine of justification through one's own doing, more readily

in Scripture than the teaching of Luther. The papal doctrine is not foolishness to the Greeks nor a stumbling block to the Jews. Every honorable, upright, respectable Roman scholar condemns the misuse of the authority of the church, the sins and shameful practices of the priests and popes; with complete conviction he considers the Roman system divine and scriptural. For it has proceeded from the natural human reason and the natural human heart, which have made themselves masters over Scripture.

This explains the thorough legalizing and, as a result, externalizing of the whole of Christian doctrine in the papacy. The New Testament church is the continuation of the Old Testament external theocracy, only endowed with a full measure of the gifts of Christ but yet a legally constituted state. Christ is *novus legislator* in it and for it. The gospel, no matter how great its grace may be, is a new law. The apostles were legally appointed to be overlords. Their being representatives of Christ is a legal matter, and this office is equipped with legal authority. All of their power is legal, statutory power. All sacraments are laws; all the offices, ordinances, institutions, from the primacy of Peter, from the pope, all the way down to the office of priest, yes, even to the doorkeeper and holy water, all are legal, conscience-binding arrangements, causing sin, under circumstances bringing damnation. Thus it is a matter of course that a person can achieve grace and salvation only through works, that is, through fulfilling all of these legal demands and regulations. It is a matter of course that the commands of the church as the representative and legally authorized plenipotentiary of Christ are of themselves conscience binding, in short, that the papacy is a unique, vast legal institution and that its doctrine and regulations are a unique, vast mass of work-righteousness. For natural human reason and the law are counterparts, each demanding the other. A religion of natural reason is necessarily a religion of the law, which is rooted so deeply in the human heart that even the most mature Christian never gets rid of it completely. For this reason the papacy in this primary and essential respect corresponds to all heathen non-Christian religions. Like these, it is through and through a religion characterized by law, because it, like these, is the religion of natural depraved carnal reason. Only materially does it differ from these; in essence it is the same.<sup>10</sup>

In discussing the teachings of Vatican II, it is natural for us confessional Lutherans to ask a couple basic questions regarding the council: (1) How did Scripture fare at the council? (2) How did the gospel fare?

Regarding the first question, how did Scripture fare at the council, there is both good news and bad news to report. The council called for a concentrated effort to become more of a "Bible church" than it had been in the past. Certainly, the Catholic Church has become that in at least some respects. Because of the change from Latin to the vernacular in the liturgy, along with the development of the three-year lectionary, which the council called for, more Catholics are hearing more Scripture in their own languages than they had heard for probably at least 15 centuries. Catholics, at least in predominantly Protestant countries like the United States, have been encouraged since the council to read Scripture. Many American parishes, since most are so large, encourage parishioners to become active in various types of small fellowship groups in the parish that include Bible study and prayer. It seems that Catholic lay people in general, at least in a largely Protestant country like the United States, are much less afraid of the Bible as basically a book for heretical Protestants than they were before Vatican II. While most Catholics probably still don't think of themselves as Bible readers the way most Protestants do, there can be no debate that Catholics are reading Scripture more than they used to, and they certainly are hearing more Scripture as it is read in their liturgical services than prior to Vatican II. For that we can only rejoice and thank God, confident that his Word is powerful and effective and will bear fruit in the hearts of those who hear it.

On the down side, the council reaffirmed sacred Tradition along with Scripture as the vehicle of God's revelation to mankind. Consider just one statement, typical of many in *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation:

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<sup>10</sup> August Pieper, "Luther's Doctrine of Church and Ministry", *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. 3 (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1977), pp. 171, 172.

Thus it comes about that the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone [non *per solam sacram scripturam*]. Hence both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal feelings of devotion and reverence (DV 9).<sup>11</sup>

Something else, closely related, hasn't changed:

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone [*soli vivo ecclesiae magisterio*].... It is clear, therefore, that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls. (DV 10)

Formally, on paper, the Catholic Church teaches that there is one authority in the church, the Word of God. God's Word, however, comes in two forms or vehicles, Holy Scripture and sacred Tradition. Both require the papal magisterium to teach and interpret them authoritatively; in fact, Scripture and sacred Tradition "cannot stand" without the magisterium! Both in practice and in the documents of Vatican II, we see that the real authority in the Roman Church still resides in the papacy. What comes down to *sola papa* is still affirmed, while *sola Scriptura* is still rejected.

Historically, the Roman Church has always affirmed the divine verbal inspiration and plenary inerrancy of Holy Scripture, an article of faith on which Lutherans and Catholics in the 16<sup>th</sup> century were agreed. *Dei Verbum* makes some fine statements about God as the author of Scripture, and that therefore Scripture truly is the inspired Word of God and true. At the same time, theological compromise with modern liberal views of Scripture is found all over the document *Dei Verbum* allows for what is clearly a neo-orthodox view of revelation, with the emphasis on the *action* of God revealing *himself*, as opposed to God's revealed *Word*, with its knowable, divinely inspired *content*. In further compromise with theological modernism, *Dei Verbum* gave its imprimatur to the negative historical-critical methods of Bible interpretation (DV 12). In the years since the council, Catholic biblical scholarship has become thoroughly higher-critical in its approach to Scripture. What took two hundred years for liberal Protestant churches to do to the Bible, the Catholic Church did in twenty. Clearly, in this respect, Scripture is faring considerably worse today in the Catholic Church than it did in the past, when the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture were still at least formally upheld. So, has official Catholic teaching on Scripture changed with Vatican II? I would say both no and yes, as I have explained.

How did the gospel fare at Vatican II? To answer that question, I will come at it in several ways. First of all, we can find a number of fine gospel statements in the council documents. Listen to the opening words of Chapter I of *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*:

God who "wills that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:4), "who in many times and various ways spoke of old to the fathers through the prophets" (Heb. 1: 1), when the fullness of time had come sent his Son, the Word made flesh, anointed by the Holy Spirit, to preach the Gospel to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart, to be a bodily and spiritual medicine: the Mediator between God and man. For his humanity united with the Person of the Word was the instrument of our salvation. Therefore, "in Christ the perfect achievement of our reconciliation came forth and the fullness of divine worship was given to us."

The wonderful works of God among the people of the Old Testament were but a prelude to the work of Christ Our Lord in redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God. He achieved his task

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<sup>11</sup> This and all future quotations of the council documents are taken from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Austin Flannery, general editor. (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1997).

principally by the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and glorious ascension, whereby “dying, he destroyed our death, and rising, restored our life.” (SC 5)

After quoting this passage, Pastor Harold Wicke, in a district convention essay that was published in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, wrote:

With a few minor changes this statement could appear in the *Northwestern Lutheran* as a fine presentation of the Gospel message. This is not the only such passage in the Documents of Vatican II. We are grateful to the Lord for each such passage, for Roman Catholics reading and studying these documents thereby do come face to face with the claims of our Lord Jesus Christ, with the message preached by Peter and Paul and all the other apostles of Jesus Christ. We can rightly call such statements evangelical.<sup>12</sup>

We rightly then ask, has Rome changed its position since the 16<sup>th</sup> century when at Trent it officially condemned the Lutheran, biblical gospel? Sadly and tragically, such is not the case. First of all, consider that Vatican II simply did not address the issue of the justification of the sinner before God. That was a non-issue for Vatican II; Tridentine teaching was assumed. That becomes obvious when we see how Vatican II denies the teaching of *solus Christus* by continuing to hold to Mary and the saints as necessary and meritorious mediators of salvation. Mary is even spoken of as a cause of salvation (*causa salutis*) along with Christ (LG 56). The Marian errors of the immaculate conception and the bodily assumption into heaven are affirmed (LG 56,59). Mary is described as assisting her Son in his work of redemption (LG 56,58,61,62). Together with Mary, the saints are said to “intercede with the Father for us, as they proffer the merits which they acquired on earth through the one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus” (LG 49). Therefore the saints are to be invoked “for the help of their intercession” (LG 50). What Rome affirms in the reference to Christ the mediator, she denies with the meritorious intercession of Mary and the saints. The judgment of the Lutheran Confessions still stands:

For here the honor belonging only to Christ is altogether transferred to the saints.... [Invoking the saints for their meritorious intercession] obscures Christ’s office, and transfers the confidence of mercy due Christ to the saints. (Ap XXI: 14,15, Triglotta)

The glory of Christ’s office as our Redeemer is likewise obscured by Rome’s teaching on the propitiatory sacrifice of the Mass, which Vatican II still affirms, even making it the ultimate synergism: “Taking part in the eucharistic sacrifice, the source and summit of the Christian life, they offer the divine victim to God *and* themselves *along* with it” (LG 11, emphasis added).<sup>13</sup>

While the teaching of purgatory is not prominent in Vatican II, it is nevertheless still affirmed (LG 49,51).

Very prominent in Vatican II documents, by comparison, is what the council teaches about the salvation of non-Christians:

Those who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the People of God in various ways. There is, first, that people to which the covenants and promises were made, and from which Christ was born according to the flesh (cf. Rom. 9:4-5): in view of the divine choice, they are a people most dear for the sake of the fathers, for the gifts of God are without repentance (cf. Rom. 11:29-29). But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Moslems: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful

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<sup>12</sup> Harold Wicke, “An Evaluation of the Lutheran Confessions”, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (April 1967), p. 102.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. SC 48 and PO 2, 5 for further references to the sacrifice of the Mass.

God, mankind's judge on the last day. Nor is God remote from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, since he gives to all men life and breath and all things (cf. Acts 17:25-28), and since the Saviour wills all men to be saved (cf. I Tim. 2:4). Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life. (LG 16)

What a blatant denial of the gospel of *solus Christus, sola gratia, and sola fides!* For further analysis of how Vatican II undermines the gospel with a host of other false doctrines and practices, such as the whole penitential and sacerdotal systems, I refer you to Harold Wicke's very insightful essay in the WLQ, referred to before. We let Pastor Wicke summarize for us how the gospel fared at Vatican II:

Those who take the Lutheran confession of the Gospel seriously can die at peace with God; those who follow Vatican II to the letter can but despair. Having read both [the documents of Vatican II and the Lutheran Confessions], we shall once more be convinced that that which really stands between Paul the Apostle and Paul VI is 2 Thessalonians 2. As a result, none of these decrees, constitutions, and declarations are either truly apostolic, truly evangelic, or truly catholic, though they claim to be all. The great stumbling block is still Vatican I, which wrote Amen to the verdict of the Smalcald Articles. The one recurring premise is that Peter was appointed head of the church, vicar of Christ, and that the Pope is his divinely appointed successor and the supreme teaching authority in the church.

Despite statements to the effect that the Counter-Reformation has come to an end, Vatican II is still a reaction over against the Lutheran Confessions, though they are never mentioned by name. The Roman Church still demonstrates herself as Mother and Defender of all the abuses cited in our Confessional writings. In the documents of Vatican II the unBiblical theory of merit is still reacting to the core of the Gospel proclamation, justification by faith Christ.<sup>14</sup>

### **Aftermath of the council**

Pope John XXIII called the council for the purpose of *aggiornamento*, to “let some fresh air into the church.” By 1968, however, Pope Paul VI was publicly stating that he feared that the church, by opening up to the modern world, instead had allowed in a spirit that was inimical to Catholicism. The pope stated, “The Church is in a disturbed period of self-criticism, or what would better be called self-demolition. It is an acute and complicated upheaval which nobody would have expected after the council. It is almost as if the Church were attacking herself.”<sup>15</sup> By 1972 the pope had become even more alarmed, as he revealed in his famous “smoke of Satan” speech. Paul VI said that he sensed “from somewhere or other the smoke of Satan has entered the temple of God.”<sup>16</sup> Those are certainly strong words coming from a pope to describe in public the state of affairs in the Catholic Church.

What happened between 1960, when John XXIII was calling for *aggiornamento*, opening the windows to let some fresh air into the church, and 1972 when Paul VI feared that what had entered the church was not the fresh air of spiritual renewal but the smoke of Satan? As I pointed out earlier in the essay, what John XXIII called for and what the Catholic Church got was the spirit of the modern age, the spirit of the Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment, which is no friend to any claims of revealed religion and absolute authority. Each autonomous individual ends up being his or her own authority. Keep in mind also that Vatican II and the years

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<sup>14</sup> Wicke, WLQ Vol. 64, No. 1 (January, 1967), p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted by Romario Amerio in *Iota Unum: A Study of Changes in the Catholic Church in the XXth Century* (Kansas City, Missouri: Sarto House, 1996), p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

right after the council coincided with the period of great social unrest throughout the western world. It was the period when of the Vietnam War was escalating, the period of great social change when many were rebelling against all forms of external authority. Many intellectuals on college and university campuses both in Europe and North America flirted with or embraced Marxism.

Among the first in the Catholic Church to pick up on this spirit of the age were the professional theologians. They started questioning individual Catholic doctrines, left and right. But this spirit also quickly infected a number of bishops. In 1966 “The Dutch Catechism,” appeared with the approval of the Dutch hierarchy. This catechism watered down a number of traditional Catholic dogmas, such as original sin, the existence of angels and demons, the virgin birth of Christ, and transubstantiation, among others. When the Vatican objected to the catechism, a political standoff resulted that dragged on for years. The next event that unleashed a real firestorm of theological dissent among Catholic theologians all over the world was Pope Paul’s birth control encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. The encyclical taught nothing new; it merely reaffirmed traditional Catholic teaching, which forbids the use of artificial methods of birth control. As part of a well-organized response to the encyclical, over two hundred Catholic theologians in the United States took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times*, with their signatures under a statement by Fr. Charles Curran of Catholic University of America. The statement not only dissented from the pope’s teaching on birth control *per se* but also took issue with his authority to teach them anything. Another highly provocative salvo was soon fired by Hans Kling in his book *Infallible?* (1970). Kling questioned not only the concept of an infallible papacy but an infallible anything. The spirit that was and still is driving all of the theological dissent in the Catholic Church is not the evangelical spirit of Luther and the Reformation but the secular spirit of the Enlightenment, which exalts reason and the autonomous individual over everything else. Of course, it didn’t take long for this spirit to filter down into local Catholic parishes and religious communities. The crisis of authority became evident on the parish level as parish priests started breaking or ignoring all kinds of rules and laws of the church. Soon Catholic publishers of catechetical materials also adopted this spirit, evident by watered down presentations of Catholic doctrine employing highly subjective methodologies, all driven by a secular, modernistic approach to religion. As a result, many Catholics today don’t seem to know what to believe and end up taking a “cafeteria approach” to religion.

In the United States since Vatican II, weekly attendance at Mass has plummeted from about 75 per cent to about 30 per cent. Private confession has also fallen way off. Worldwide, defections from the priesthood and religious orders in the years after the council numbered in the tens of thousands. Many Catholic theologians have been calling for, among other things, the ordination of women and legitimizing homosexuality. Where, we might ask, have the bishops been during all these crises? It seems most of them have also caught the “spirit of Vatican II,” especially the part that Pope John called for in his opening speech at the council: “Nowadays, however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnation.”

It seems that now, some thirty years after the council, the great accomplishment of Pope John Paul II has been just keeping the “bark of Peter” from flying apart. As things stand now, the vast majority of the active bishops and cardinals in the church have been hand-picked by John Paul. A few of the more radical dissenting theologians, like Curran and Kung, have been disciplined and marginalized. It seems that many of the younger priests coming out of Catholic seminaries in more recent years (not that there are that many, at least in western countries), are taking a more conservative, pro-Vatican stance on church teaching. The more conservative hierarchy is attempting to regain control of catechetical instruction, using the universal *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as a benchmark for Catholic orthodoxy. Theological dissent from the Vatican, however, still seems to be the trend-almost the norm-among a great number of Catholic theologians. Doctrinal pluralism pervades the Catholic Church today probably as much as it ever did.

And so the Catholic synthesis continues. In the Middle Ages the over-riding issue in every theological debate and controversy was what is the nature of authority in the church? The synthesis back then included

Scripture, church fathers, decrees of popes and church councils, canon law, writings of saints and theologians, reason, and Aristotle. Today the over-arching issue is still the same. All the old components of the synthesis are still there, some less emphasized than previously; others are more emphasized and developed than previously. As a result of Vatican II at least a couple more components have been added the Catholic synthesis: modern philosophy and the conscience of the autonomous individual.

### **What does Vatican II have to do with our ministry as Lutheran pastors?**

Our considerations here, of course, reflect a confessional Lutheran orientation, and not that of the false ecumenism of the Lutheran World Federation. We have time only to list briefly a few points.

1. Because of Vatican II and its call for “openness” toward people of other faiths, we probably have more opportunities to witness and share the unconditioned gospel with Catholics than we had previously. Many Catholics aren’t nearly so uptight and defensive when it comes to talking about religion with non-Catholics as they were a generation or more ago.
2. The relaxation of Catholic pre-nuptial agreements, as well as general doctrinal indifference, has resulted in more Catholics being open to considering marrying someone outside their faith (including our WELS members) than previously, giving us the opportunity in some cases to instruct them.
3. Because of the doctrinal dissent and theological pluralism that has mushroomed in the Catholic Church since Vatican II, we can’t make assumptions about individual Catholics and their beliefs. For at least some Catholics today, purgatory plays little, if any part in their religious thinking. Some have not developed much of any Marian piety. Many think of the pope as a father figure, head pastor of the church, and symbol of church unity but not as an infallible teacher whose teachings and pronouncements (even the non-ex *cathedra ones*) are binding on their consciences. Some Catholics, especially some nominal ones, are so spiritually confused that they are virtually agnostics. A very few Catholics may come to us, by God’s grace, whose faith has already been evangelically formed by the Holy Spirit in a remarkable way. Few Catholics will probably have ever heard before a clear presentation of the unconditioned gospel.
4. We are only being honest and fair when we admit that Vatican II resulted in some liturgical reforms that can and do serve the gospel very well, such as the expanded lectionary, which brings more of God’s Word (Old Testament, Psalm, Epistle, Gospel) to God’s people every week than did the historic one-year lectionary (only Epistle and Gospel readings). A number of Catholic musicians have composed and published liturgical music (psalmody, hymnody, and liturgical songs) in contemporary American folk styles which many congregations can easily learn and find enjoyable to sing. In Christian liberty Lutherans have always freely borrowed and adapted the best of such outward forms if and when such forms serve the gospel.
5. We recognize a certain tension that may sometimes puzzle some of our people when, on the one hand, we warn against the abominable errors of the Antichrist and the Roman Church and, on the other hand, we use outward forms of ministry and worship that are part of our religious heritage as Lutherans and western Christians but are also associated with Roman Catholicism. This tension requires continual, patient instruction in the evangelical purpose and use of outward forms, which are adiaphora, and sound pastoral judgment whenever we may introduce new forms.
6. We need continually not only to teach our people all the saving truths of Scripture so that they are well-grounded in them; we also need to point out explicitly the soul-destroying errors of false-teaching



churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, and that it is God's will that we avoid practicing church fellowship with them (Ro 16:17,18).

7. When we point out the false teachings of the Catholic Church, the Eighth Commandment demands that we represent their church and its teachings accurately. That requires that we pastors be familiar with official Catholic teaching first hand, as it is presented in key doctrinal texts of the Council of Trent, Vatican I, Vatican II, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

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