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## 50 and 10: Years to Remember

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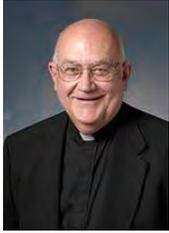
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## 50 and 10: Years to Remember

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"My last years in the seminary (1959-1960) were to be academically uneventful until the faculty and students read the startling announcement: *Pope John XXIII Summons an Ecumenical Council*. Ninety years had passed since the last Council and Vatican Council I was the first in over 300 years. Although we had to go to our textbooks to find out about the workings of a Council, the students, at least, were excited about the possibilities. In this brief reflection I want to share some of my memories of Vatican Council II now celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and why the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first edition of *Verbum*, a publication of the Religious Studies Department, would probably not be possible without it.



*Dr. William Graf*

## **50 AND 10: YEARS TO REMEMBER**

My last years in the seminary (1959-1960) were to be academically uneventful until the faculty and students read the startling announcement: *Pope John XXIII Summons an Ecumenical Council*. Ninety years had passed since the last Council and Vatican Council I was the first in over 300 years. Although we had to go to our textbooks to find out about the workings of a Council, the students, at least, were excited about the possibilities. In this brief reflection I want to share some of my memories of Vatican Council II now celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and why the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first edition of Verbum, a publication of the Religious Studies Department, would probably not be possible without it.

A small group of us students had been meeting during the late Fifties during our evening recreation time to discuss possible changes in the liturgy, especially if we could use English someday or even a newer approach to Scripture reading. At the time good translations were not available and we were further restricted because most of the Roman Catholic commentaries were in languages other than English. Additionally, each day for about an hour priests and deacons recited the Divine Office in Latin. We were wondering (and hoping) if it could be prayed in English with a better variety of readings. In those small aspects of liturgy alone we became excited about such possibilities in this new Council, Vatican II.

By the time we were ordained in 1960, the Vatican offices were polling the bishops for input as to possible topics and areas of concern. The friendly rotund Pope favored a “pastoral council” free of condemnations or heavy dogmatic pronouncements. “How could the Church better listen and respond to other Christians seeking peace and a sense of joy?” This was his vague vision with no specific agenda. Only saints and mystics work this way. Trusting in the Holy Spirit to bring fresh ideas (an “aggiornamento”) to an entrenched Roman Curia, the equivalent to our country’s Presidential Cabinet, and a diverse body of dogmatically trained bishops from across the world was a monumental act of faith. This would be a Council totally different from any other: it was to be truly worldwide by reason of different languages, cultures, geography, economic and political conditions. Pope John XXIII, the saintly visionary, trusted in the Spirit to bring some much needed fresh air into a closed and dusty institution.

When 2500 council fathers (bishops from around the world) gathered in Rome on October 13, 1962 for the first general session, the Curia-prepared documents were on the table with the expectation that they would be readily accepted; the Council could conclude its business after one or two sessions. The aging Pope knew that he had life-threatening cancer and wanted some assurances that he would see the proposed deliberations end quickly. However, many of the council fathers, especially from northern Europe, harbored a proven mistrust of the Curia. The documents and the appointed leadership were challenged and

rejected within the first few days; ultimately the Council was to last for four sessions and not reach a joyful conclusion until December 8, 1965. The death of the beloved Pope John XXIII sadly interrupted the Council, but the election of Pope Paul VI guaranteed it would continue.

Memories of those provocative years still excite me. A sense of hope and openness to different ways (liturgically, socially, ecumenically, for example) that the Church would express itself sparked lively discussions at priests' gatherings. With the growing awareness of the Church's vision of itself, new approaches surfaced to deal with pressing contemporary issues. Many of the council fathers, for example, were living under oppressive regimes and hungered for more religious freedom; others experienced the violence of war and sought new procedures to work with other communities of good will also seeking a peaceful end to violence. Recognizing the many gifts of a better educated laity, the majority of the bishops wanted to find new ways to use those special gifts in the service of the local churches. The word, dialogue, found its way into honest conversations with equals as well as between divergent groups. Listening became as important as talking or dictating.

The worldwide gathering of bishops speaking different languages encouraged the bishops to press for liturgical changes especially to allow for the celebration of the sacraments in the language of the people: whatever language that might be. Because all public deliberations were in Latin without translators probably pushed this item to the front of the agenda. If nothing else, the liturgical language of the people became a language the person in the pew could hear and speak with greater ease. I remember the smiles and excitement of those first weeks when celebrating Mass with people and, shortly later, facing them for the length of the Mass. Reluctant singing, at first, became more enthusiastic as we learned newer hymns in English-some of which were formerly forbidden to be sung or played in church. The biblical concept of the priesthood of the faithful took on sensible meaning when lay people, men and women, proclaimed the Scripture readings and served as extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist with many taking Holy Communion to the sick and homebound.

I was lucky to have a pastor who reminded us associates that our call was to do "what is best for the people." He enthusiastically embraced each change and sometimes anticipated the next change with a prophetic "we'll be doing it soon anyways." Perhaps his formal theology was less than current, but it was a pastoral theology of making the gospel real for the people. Seldom did I see him with a textbook in hand, but I discovered how he read and studied the needs of the people. For me, he preached and practiced what the documents were saying: "the Church is the people of God." The best leaders were servants who listened; we could best serve our parishioners by listening. Many of us, at the time, were learning a new approach to theology, liturgy, and Scripture as 16 different documents were voted upon and released over the 4 years of the council's deliberations. The guidelines for their interpretation would come later. Meanwhile, we improvised on our own or, after checking with the neighboring pastors, tried to provide guidance by listening to each other. The spirit of the council fathers, at least the vast majority, instilled new life in the Church that was exciting, challenging, freeing, powerfully Spirit-filled that encouraged a pastoral approach in light of the vision of John XXIII.

As the Council meetings continued, there were official press releases. However, we young Council-watchers found our "real" source of information in Xavier Rynne's (a pseudonym) series of magazine articles (and later, books) detailing the disagreements and intrigue taking place in the meeting rooms and hallways. In Rochester a few of the priests were

lucky to read Bishop Casey's letters to his parishioners. As an auxiliary bishop of Rochester and pastor of Sacred Heart Cathedral, his insights and the thoughtful reflections of his own experiences in Rome spoke eloquently of his own change of heart as he witnessed the power of the Spirit during the four lively sessions. Bishop Casey took the Council's actions seriously and implemented them with true pastoral concern. These unofficial letters and articles fed the readers' hunger for the kind of changes that would strengthen the new roles of the laity and bishops in the local churches. Many good bishops set the pace for an enlivened Church. Shortly after the Council ended, Archbishop Fulton Sheen became our local bishop. His announced vision was to make the Diocese of Rochester a Vatican II church. Dialogue was the new way of conducting business in his final words to the priests of the diocese upon his retirement, he apologized for the times he had failed the process. Even the apology by a bishop was new and was warmly accepted.

By the time the Council was over, I had moved to a new and fortuitous assignment. I became part of an ecumenical and inter-religious group in Ithaca. I was in Campus Ministry at Ithaca College. In those days we called it "Newman work" because it was done under the patronage and inspiration of the 19<sup>th</sup> century convert, John Henry Newman. I also assisted at the local downtown parish. Neighboring ministers, younger priests, and rabbis gathered for serious discussions ranging from the mission of church, the role of ministry, celibacy and a married clergy, education of young people, the role of the lay person in church/synagogue governance. The meetings were always lively, but even more, the meetings encouraged each us because we listened to each other. No one of us had the answer to any question. We surprisingly discovered that we, like the people we served, were all pilgrims on a journey. The shepherds needed each other to reach our common goal in peace and with integrity. Unity that brings peace is possible.

A welcome contribution of the Second Vatican Council was a greater appreciation of biblical studies. Most of us priests studied Scripture much like we had studied chemistry or Dante with little appreciation of its vital connections to theology and the liturgy. Again, there was the hunger. Study groups surfaced, but there was a dearth of books. Biblical Study Weeks became available. Groups of priests from Rochester traveled hundreds of miles to hear a series of lectures from rising biblical superstars. I remember one summer evening well-over 45 priests from Rochester dined together for a festive meal just outside Chicago to exchange ideas about the course of biblical studies that had brought us 600 miles from home. Prayer services using biblical texts for prayer and reflection, thus replacing popular devotions and novenas, became a common experience for many parishes. The Jerusalem Bible, its translation and especially the scholarly footnotes, was our "must have book" for study and private prayer.

As I write these memories, the joy and challenge of those times still excite me. For me, they were the good old days. I remember how difficult it was to change and harder even to encourage change in our places of worship. Although we were warned that we will probably be changing for the rest of our lives, we wanted some constants in our life. Upon reflection, those constants were always there. We were too busy changing "things" to reflect on the reason for change or to see how change can help us appreciate the meaning of the message which does not change. Subsequent events forced me and many of my generation to deeper reflection and contemplation of that same message.

Forty years later Fr. Michael Costanzo initiated Verbum, a journal of student and faculty papers, photographs, essays, and poetry. The cover design of its logo and the makeup of the journal reflect its ecumenical and inter-religious focus. The opportunity for faculty and students, past and present, to articulate a variety of informed opinions about their religious views and traditions illustrates the Vatican Council's philosophy of religious freedom of conscience and expression. Each semester Fr. Costanzo has taken on the task to edit and publish Verbum initially seeking outside funding and, more recently, with the support of Student Government and the Religious Studies Club. One semester, from his sick bed while recovering from a heart attack, Fr. Costanzo still made the publication deadline. How much we owe him for his relentless commitment these past 10 years!

What has impressed me over the years was the fact that the publication was all-embracing not only of authors, but also of titles. Photographic art and poetry illustrated the faith and religious beliefs of a wide variety of contributors in creative and new ways. During this tenth year of publication, our department extends our deepest gratitude to Fr. Costanzo and the many people whose talents made Verbum possible. Bookshelves contain a great number of books and documents reflecting the work of Vatican Council II; this small journal reflects its spirit.

William Graf

Chair of the Religious Studies Department  
William and Helen Cavanaugh Chair of Catholic Studies



*Blue Moon over Rochester, NY - August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2012*

*(Photo by MC)*