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## The Second Vatican Council Fifty Years Later: Achievements and Challenges

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### Abstract

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

"I would like to begin this lecture with a personal perspective followed by some introductory comments concerning the ongoing "clash of interpretations" surrounding Vatican II and its documents, followed by a brief survey of each document noting some of its achievements and, in my opinion, ongoing challenges."



Dr. John Colacino

## **The Second Vatican Council Fifty Years Later: Achievements and Challenges**

*St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry; October 24, 2012*

### **Part 1**

I would like to begin this lecture with a personal perspective followed by some introductory comments concerning the ongoing “clash of interpretations” surrounding Vatican II and its documents, followed by a brief survey of each document noting some of its achievements and, in my opinion, ongoing challenges.

First off, in the interests of full disclosure, I was in Sister Mary Marina’s first grade class when the Council opened in October of 1962. The only memory I have of that time were the “duck and cover” drills we had in the basement of St. Michael’s School in Newark should a nuclear war break out, as the Cuban Missile Crisis took place that very same month. So I am too young to have been part of the “good old days” of the 40s and 50s, likewise the heady days of “the 60s,” (Woodstock happened between seventh and eighth grade). Yet, I am too old to have been a soldier in training for the battles that were shaping up in the 80s and 90s.

Alas, I am a creature of the “sandwiched ‘70s” which, despite their reputation for lassitude, provided me with a memorable religious foundation. Among other things, a vibrant parish community, one that also held two rummage sales every year at which I was able to purchase books for a dime apiece -- books I think were being tossed out by those living in the rectory and convent. So I had the opportunity to read things like de Lubac’s *Splendor of the Church*, Dom Boylan’s *This Tremendous Lover*, Abbot Marmion’s *Christ the Life of the Soul*, Maritain’s *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, and, of course, a Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*. That solid, if “traditional,” foundation has remained with me, along with the more “progressive” experience of church I enjoyed in my high school years due to renewal movements like Teen Seminar.

By the time I was ordained in 1980, however, the contest for the “real Council” was underway and, frankly, I have always felt caught in the middle: symbolized by a double ordination, so to speak -- directly at the hands of Matthew Clark, and indirectly, through him, by Bl. John Paul II. Hence, to half the world I look somewhat conservative, and to the other, rather liberal. But I consider myself neither, as I hope my subsequent comments will bear out.

Let me say something now about the opposing views of the Council that have emerged. They were present, you know, from its second meeting on October 13, 1962 when the Council’s first “general congregation” met, only to adjourn after less than an hour, which included Mass! Cardinals Liénart and Frings (Frings accompanied by his *peritus* Joseph Ratzinger) spearheaded the effort to postpone for several days the election of members of the conciliar commissions to allow episcopal conferences and other groups of bishops the opportunity to consider the best candidates for these bodies, since they would be responsible for preparing the texts the Council would consider for adoption.

The effort--to the sustained applause of the assembled bishops--by Liénart and Frings to win more time to consider the elected candidates for these commissions was in direct conflict with the plan of the curialists to proceed immediately. This was the first of the “revolutionary” events on the part of the more progressive bishops of the Central European Bloc also known as “the World Alliance” when African and Latin American bishops sympathetic to its views were added: all of course trying to thwart the hoped for hegemony of their more conservatives counterparts. In the words of Andrea Riccardi,

The fundamental choice that had to be made at the beginning of the Council was whether it was to govern itself.... [If it did not, the] result would have been to establish a continuity between the preconiliar work and the Council itself, which would thereby have automatically accepted the schema[s] already prepared. In

this way, the choice made by the Curia during the preparatory phase would have been confirmed (Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, vol. II, 26).

Please note that pesky word, “continuity.” This has become a buzzword in the current debates about the Council, between the partisans of a “hermeneutic of continuity” and a so-called “hermeneutic of rupture,” or at least “discontinuity.” This is the core of the issue in the dispute with the Society of St. Pius X, which will only accept the Council where it can be clearly demonstrated to be in continuity with the past, especially in areas of liturgy, ecclesiology and ecumenism. Despite valiant efforts at a rapprochement (some would say, bending over backwards), neither John Paul II nor Benedict XVI has been able to secure an agreement with the heirs to Marcel Lefebvre that the Council, while always to be interpreted in the light of (capital T) Tradition, is nonetheless in harmony with that Tradition. While the partisans of, let’s call them “Continuitists-in-Discontinuity,” in appealing to the principles of doctrinal development allow that, in fact, the Council cannot be seen in all respects to accord with Catholic teaching in the post-Tridentine period. The pope himself has said that there was a “blending, at different levels, of continuity and discontinuity” and that it is in a “combination” of these that “the very nature of true reform consists” (Address to the Roman Curia; December 22, 2005).

More recently, another lens through which to see the differing interpretations has been mentioned, namely a more Platonizing neo-Augustinian lens and a more Aristotelian neo-Thomist lens: the former seeing things through a more *a priori* and idealized perspective and the other a more *a posteriori* and empirical one. This would account for the difference between those who want *Lumen gentium* to be the interpretative control on the Council as a whole and those who would prefer *Gaudium et spes* to provide that service – the so-called *ad intra* treatment of the church versus its *ad extra* counterpart.

What I find interesting in this view of things is how it suggests yet another factor at work, a psychological one, stemming from the typological theory of Carl Jung who, when writing his seminal book, *Psychological Types* (on which the Myers-Briggs typology would be based) spent a considerable time, believe it or not, in showing how theological disputes in Christianity are, in part, rooted in well-known personality differences among human beings. I would like to quote from the frontispiece of that book which, in its own way, points out how we all tend to favor Plato-Augustine or Aristotle-Thomas, along with their differing attitudes of introversion and extraversion. It is a quote that I think sheds some further light on “which Council” you might prefer:

Plato and Aristotle! These are not merely two systems; they are two types of two distinct human natures, which from time immemorial, under every aspect of disguise, stand more or less inimically opposed. The whole medieval world in particular was riven by this conflict, which persists down to the present day, and which forms the most essential content of the history of the Christian Church. Although under other names, it is always of Plato and Aristotle that we speak. Visionary, mystical, Platonic natures disclose Christian ideas and the corresponding symbols from the fathomless depths of their souls. Practical, orderly, Aristotelian natures build out of these ideas and symbol a fixed system, a dogma and a cult. Finally the Church embraces both natures, one of them entrenched in the clergy and the other in monasticism, but both keeping up a constant feud (*Collected Works*, Vol. 6, quoting Heine)

So it is not an easy matter, in the words of Benedict XVI in his apostolic letter announcing the Year of Faith that began on October 11, “to interpret and implement [the Council] guided by a right hermeneutic [so the Council] can be and can become increasingly powerful for the ever necessary renewal of the Church” (*Porta fidei*, no. 5). The pope, moreover, would not have us lose sight of the Council texts themselves, noting with his predecessor how they “have lost nothing of their value or brilliance” (*ibid*) and most recently, in the homily that opened the Year of Faith, he noted how “the true legacy of Vatican II is to be found in [the Council documents themselves]”.

And so we turn to a consideration of the 16 documents variously issued as constitutions, decrees or declarations. I will treat some of them rather cursorily and others with a bit more detail, but for each I will suggest some of what, in my view, they have achieved and, secondly, where they still pose unmet challenges for the church a half century later – an hermeneutic of *aggiornamento*, if you will. I will treat the documents in the approximate order of their promulgation and the accompanying slides will remind you of their content.

One hardly knows how to begin with the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the achievements are so manifold: vernacularization of the rites, the enhanced participation of all in the assembly, the enrichment of the lectionaries and sacramentaries, the simplification of the calendar, the renewal of preaching, the restoration of the chalice to the laity, the expansion of liturgical ministries, etc. This goes almost without saying.

As for challenges, there are plenty, far too many to name but a few. In doing so, I am responding to what has come to be known as “the reform of the reform” whose views are daily available on the blog *New Liturgical*

*Movement*, founded and edited by Shawn Tribe. Its foil, another blog called *Pray Tell: Worship, Wit and Wisdom*, represents liturgical sympathies largely in line with the Collegeville Benedictines. From the reform of the reform side, I would maintain that the frequently bemoaned loss of the sense of the sacred and transcendent in our liturgies is a crucial issue deserving very serious attention. Whether this requires a resurrection of pre-conciliar liturgical forms is, however, debatable. From the other side, I am not always convinced that those who are largely content with liturgical developments since the Council (except for the new translation of the Roman Missal!) are always honest about what in my view has been, and remains, deplorable. The one area frequently cited as the neuralgic sore spot between these camps is music and, I must confess, here I am sympathetic with the so-called new liturgical movement. But whether a steady diet of Gregorian chant and polyphony is the sole response to the present state of liturgical music is another question.

The restoration of the Extraordinary Form alongside the Ordinary Form of course poses not a few challenges and perhaps some opportunities, despite the former's limited appeal. It seems to me the partisans of the classic form see the pope's stated desire to have the two forms mutually enrich each other as mostly a one-way street. Be that as it may, I suspect that we are in for a period of hybridization whose results might issue in a fourth typical edition of the Roman Missal where for example, the previous offertory prayers at Mass could reappear as an option just as the 1962 version should be enriched by many of the new texts in the current one.

A more thorough approach would, in my opinion, follow the suggestions made by the recently-deceased liturgical scholar, László Dobszay, in his *The Restoration and Organic Development of the Roman Rite* in which he calls for starting over, while making use of the lessons learned in the half century since the Constitution. Now I do not think you can really start from scratch. However, what I find attractive in his proposal is a desire to see a unified Roman rite take its cue from the classic form, but to make considerable allowance for variation in the guise of local uses, customs and options. I would recommend his challenging work, which, if ever implemented, would probably take a fifth or sixth typical edition of the Missal to evolve. Stay tuned. Liturgical reform is ever a work in progress.

Moving on, I have always found it interesting that the other document to emanate from the Council's Second Session was the Decree on the Mass Media. No one could have predicted fifty years ago the revolution to take place in communications, from the role of satellites to the World Wide Web. I recall the first time I heard a pope's voice--the message sent by Paul VI in 1975 to Americans played in churches on the occasion of Mother Seton's canonization. Who could have imagined then the media attention that would be paid to John Paul "Superstar" in his globetrotting, making the image and voice of the pope commonplace? Or the instantaneous availability of church documents on the Internet, or the burgeoning world of online religion? So there was something prescient in this document's timing, especially its insistence that Catholics be expert in the use of various media for the advancement of the Reign of God. I quote here but one passage from *Inter mirifica*:

It would be shameful if by their inactivity Catholics allowed the word of God to be silenced or obstructed by the technical difficulties which these media present, and by their admittedly enormous cost. For this reason this Holy Synod reminds them that they have the obligation to maintain and assist catholic newspapers, periodicals, film-projects, radio and television stations and programs (no. 17; Austin Flannery translation).

As for challenges, one might argue when it comes to print and online media, a wide variety of resources is available from a broad spectrum of Catholic life. But when it comes to television and radio, what is available seems in my view to be highly idiosyncratic and could easily give the impression of a monolithic Catholicism little reflective of the complexities of the church today. Then there's what Gerardo Marti is calling the "Wi-Fi Church of the Future." To which I think I already belong. For instance, I regularly download the services of two Benedictine monasteries, one in Italy and the other in France as well as those placed daily on the Vatican's website. This is how I typically pray the Divine Office using either my iPod or iPad. The question arises, however, as to whether I am praying "with" these communities, even though their prayer has been "over" for several hours or longer by the time I make use of their apps or websites. Think about it.

We come now to the Third Session, beginning with *Lumen gentium*. We cannot do even minimal justice to the achievements represented by the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. I will mention three items, beginning with the reordering of its chapter topics when compared to the pre-conciliar schema circulated by the Vatican as well as the Constitution's own drafts. Whereas Cardinal Ottaviani's preparatory schema entitled its first chapter, "The Nature of the Church Militant," emphasizing the church's visible structures, and the second draft during the Council placed the chapter on the hierarchy ahead of one entitled "The People of God and the Laity in Particular," the document eventually promulgated in its third recension would have its own chapter on the people of God,

treating the church comprehensively, before enumerating the various distinctions among its members. All this would have great symbolic and ecclesiological significance.

Yet, in my view, even more remarkable was placing in first place a chapter on the church as mystery and sacrament. For centuries, Catholic ecclesiology, in its defensive posture against certain positions of the Reformers, focused in a lop-sided fashion on the visible structures of the church. In the words of St. Robert Bellarmine, “The one true Church is as visible and palpable as the Kingdom of France or the republic of Venice” (*De Controversiis*, 1588).

To be fair, Pius XII, in his encyclical on the church, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, had already signaled that “the social structure of the Christian community, though it proclaims the wisdom of its divine Architect, still remains something inferior when compared to the spiritual gifts which give it beauty and life, and to the divine source whence they flow” (no. 63). Yet the Council, in beginning with the category of mystery, seems to place its emphasis where it had not been for a very long time.

Which leads to a corollary: namely, that the simple identification of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church requires some nuance. Whereas Pius had somewhat begrudgingly noted how non-Catholic Christians “have a certain relationship with the Mystical Body of the Redeemer, they still remain deprived of those many heavenly gifts and helps which can only be enjoyed in the Catholic Church,” (no. 103) the Council, by contrast, would affirm that the Church of Christ “constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside its visible confines” (no. 8). All this strikes me as a far cry from the ecclesiological positivism and absolutism that characterized the Tridentine period.

As for challenges, well, I have to wonder fifty years later whether the famous intervention of Bishop De Smedt of Bruges, Belgium and his criticism of the original schema’s tone still holds true to a large extent in the practical experience of day-to-day life in the church, namely that the triumvirate of “clericalism, juridicism, and triumphalism” continues to characterize all too much of our life together.

We move now to the Decree on the Catholic Eastern Churches. The Council attempted to ensure that all Catholics understand how “individual Churches, both eastern and western...are...of equal rank” (no. 3). The Decree sought, moreover, to put the brakes on all subtle and overt attempts to Latinize the Catholic East. Hence, the forceful statement that, “...the Churches of the east like those of the west have the right and duty to govern themselves according to their own special disciplines” (no. 5).

I have an anecdote illustrating how much needs to be done from the Latin side to raise awareness of even the existence of the Eastern Catholic Churches. I used to give an annual retreat for the lay associates of my community at a retreat house near Hamilton, Ontario run by Ukrainian Catholic nuns. One year they were having Sunday liturgy in their chapel at the same time we were going to have Mass, so I asked if my group could join them instead. They agreed and I gave my folks a little catechesis on the Eastern rites including the fact that the priest who would be celebrating was married, that you could go to Communion, etc. Well, at the end of the service one of my ladies went up to one of the nuns and said, “Thank you, Sister; I’m sure someday we’ll all be one!”

This is a nice lead-in to the Decree on Ecumenism! Achievements are many: even before the Council John XXIII had established the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity under the leadership of Cardinal Bea; ecumenical guests were invited to be observers at the Council sessions; during the Council Paul VI and Athenagoras I, Patriarch of Constantinople, rescinded the excommunications of 1054 and of course there have been countless dialogues, directories, encounters and documents highlighting the Catholic Church’s irrevocable commitment to ecumenism.

As for the decree itself, I can think of few clearer examples of development of doctrine than the movement from an “either you’re in or you’re out” of the “One True Church” approach to one that recognizes “degrees of communion” among Christians who, presumably, belong to the one church of Christ. Hence, the Decree notes how, “...all who have been justified by faith in baptism are incorporated into Christ; they therefore have a right to be called Christians, and with good reason are accepted as sisters and brothers by the children of the Catholic Church.... Moreover, some, even very many of the most significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church.... It follows that the separated churches and communities as such, though we believe they suffer from the defects already mentioned, have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church” (no. 3).

And a half-century later, where are we? Stalled, I think. The hope and optimism of that time has met with unexpected obstacles as other churches and communities have charted new courses in the areas of women’s access to leadership roles, human sexuality, and the ever-troublesome question of authority in the church.

Is there a way forward? Possibly, but only if the Catholic Church were to relativize the status of the councils of the second millennium along the lines of “general synods of the Western church” as Paul VI himself once referred to them (letter to Cardinal Willebrands; October 19, 1974). After all, to use a favorite metaphor of John Paul II, if the one Church of Christ breathes with its two lungs, Eastern and Western, then could these councils reliably be thought to have had the full oxygenation of the Spirit? Such a re-evaluation of the full ecumenicity of the Councils held since II Nicea could move the Catholic and Orthodox Churches to embrace the implications of the cancelled excommunications and restore full communion perhaps by 2054, the millennium anniversary of the Great Schism. As for the separations of the Sixteenth Century, more time will be needed.

We move now to the prodigious output of the Council’s Fourth Session, beginning with the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church. As is well known the interruption of the First Vatican Council created an imbalance in that the papacy was given virtually all its attention leaving a full treatment of the episcopacy unfinished. The Second Vatican Council sought to restore balance through, among other things, its teaching on bishops enjoying “the fullness of the sacrament of orders” (no. 15) thus settling the question of whether bishops were simply priests with additional faculties. Then there’s its teaching on collegiality and the role of the pope as head of the college of bishops as well as encouraging new structures such as the Synod of Bishops and strengthening existing ones such as episcopal conferences. All this has served to clarify and enhance the office of bishop.

Challenges of course are abundant. I will mention three: while many of the Council Fathers sought to lessen the influence and power of the church’s central administrative apparatus, the Roman Curia, I wonder whether a similar problem of excessive centralization and bureaucracy exists in many dioceses, effectively violating the principle of subsidiarity when it comes to pastors and parishes. Secondly, there is the difficulty of the frayed relationship between bishops and priests resulting from the scandals, making the following words of *Christus Dominus* problematic: “[Bishops] should regard [priests] as sons and friends. . . . [They] should be compassionate and helpful to those priests who are in any kind of danger or who have failed in some respect” (no. 16). And finally, there is what I call the impending bishop shortage. As the number of priests continues to shrink, there is a correspondingly smaller pool from which suitable candidates for the episcopacy can be drawn. That, coupled with the Vatican’s own admission that many priests decline the nomination, makes for situations where less than ideal people are going to be appointed. This is already apparent in religious orders.

Which brings me to the Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life. It is well known that religious congregations took up the Council’s call to return “to the primitive inspiration of the institutes” and to promote “their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time” (no. 2). This recovery of the founding charism has brought about new approaches to formation, new constitutions and customaries, new avenues of ministry, new models of living, new associations for joining the laity to their spirituality and mission – and alas, in the West, a dearth of members.

There are many factors at work here. Let me mention two that I think are relevant. Firstly, orders, more of women than men, were not able to identify equivalent replacements with the same evocative and attractive power held by the religious habit, a corporate apostolate and a distinctive community life. Well-intentioned experiments that eventually became the norm led, I fear, to a lack of cohesion and clarity of purpose making it difficult for young people especially to see what it was that made religious life something identifiable and worthwhile.

Secondly, many communities were the result of what might be called a Tridentine inspiration – foundations consistent with the dominant ethos following the Council of Trent. And while I believe the great charisms of Benedict and Scholastica, Francis and Clare, Dominic and Catherine, and Ignatius will survive, it also seems to me that the ethos consequent upon the Second Vatican Council calls for its own form of consecrated life – where, rather than the profession of the evangelical counsels leading to lay forms such as Third Orders, a Council that reaffirmed the primacy of baptism and a universal call to holiness will probably give rise to mixed movements of primarily lay men and women out of which some people will be ordained and some will profess vows: In other words, the opposite of the past. This is already happening in the so-called new ecclesial movements such as Focolare, Communion and Liberation, the Neo-Catechumenal Way, Madonna House, Heart’s Home, Sant’Egidio and others. A special challenge for the post-Tridentine communities facing the real possibility of extinction is, in my view, to do all they can to encourage and bolster their lay associates and to begin serious discussion, including canonical and legal provisions, whereby their charism and mission can continue in what will be primarily or even exclusively a lay form.

I would say something similar about the next document, the Decree on the Training of Priests. The seminary system as we have known it was a quintessentially Tridentine product, appropriate for the times. Whether the Second Vatican Council would naturally give rise to something else is, I believe, a valid question. In particular, it seems to me the Council’s emphasis on the spiritual and pastoral formation of seminarians, in addition to theological studies, might be better implemented in a less institutional setting, one more integral to the diocese in

which they will eventually serve: something like religious communities do in their houses of formation. This would more or less follow the so-called “Paris model” instituted by then-Cardinal Lustiger – a model whereby seminarians live in smaller communities, often proximate to a parish setting, while attending classes at a local theologate. This model also includes a propaedeutic year devoted exclusively to spiritual formation, and pastoral training permeates the whole of the program of priestly formation. This model has been adapted here in the US in the Archdiocese of Denver and more recently in Toronto – and seems like it would be a good fit for Rochester as well.

And while seminaries have no doubt made strides in updating their curriculum, I do not get the sense that the following wish of the Council has yet been achieved: “The pastoral concern which should characterize the whole formation program also requires that students be especially trained in what is relevant to the sacred ministry, that is, in catechesis and preaching, liturgy and administration of the sacraments, works of charity, meeting the needs of those in error and of unbelievers, and in all other pastoral duties. Let them be carefully trained in the art of directing souls, through which all members of the church can be guided towards a fully committed and apostolic Christian life and helped to fulfill the duties of their state” (no. 19). My sense is that future priests are still given a mostly-doctrinal preparation, however important that is.

From the training of priests, we move more broadly to the Declaration on Christian Education which reminds us of the church’s “grave obligation to see to the moral and religious education of all its children” (no. 7) – including “the vital importance” (no. 8) it attaches to Catholic schools. We are all aware of the challenges these have faced since the Council. The parochial elementary school where I went recently closed its doors. Perhaps the time has come, as instanced recently in Philadelphia, for Catholic education to be more and more a primarily lay initiative overseen by independent lay boards.

As we enter therefore into a new phase of the church’s educational ministry of the young in particular, I would highlight the document’s assertion that “[c]hief among” her endeavors “is catechetical instruction, which illumines and strengthens the faith, develops a life of harmony with the spirit of Christ, stimulates a conscious and fervent participation in the liturgical mystery, and encourages people to take an active part in the apostolate” (no. 4). I have often wondered what it would be like if we devoted even a fraction of the resources traditionally allotted to Catholic schools to building first-rate, life-long catechetical programs, including a much better prepared, professionally trained and compensated staff of teachers over and beyond DREs, thus raising the profile and importance of the ministry of catechist among lay ecclesial ministers.

## **Part 2**

Few documents could have foreseen its ever-growing relevance more than the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. The declaration’s affirmation that, “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in [other] religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women” (no. 2) paved the way for a new style of relating to the world’s religions. What began as a document intended to address relations between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people ended up having a broader vision. One might argue, however, that its teaching on Judaism had the more revolutionary impulse given its repudiation of supercessionism, the charge of deicide, all forms of anti-Semitism and its clear acknowledgement that Christianity emerges from an indisputable Jewish matrix.

Other fruits of the Declaration include spawning a host of official channels designed to promote study, dialogue and understanding among the world’s religions under the overall aegis of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. And who can forget the Assisi gatherings for peace of world religious leaders initiated by Pope John Paul and continued by his successor? The Rochester area has been a model for interreligious dialogue with numerous initiatives, including the Catholic Diocese’s official agreements with Jews and Muslims.

As for challenges? The church continues to need a theology of religions that, on the one hand, avoids the simplistic approaches of relativism and indifferentism where the religions are homogenized and real differences are glossed over in favor of some purported common denominator (often a lowest common denominator) and, on the other hand, gives expression to the Christian distinctive in ways that are less tied to particular historical and cultural forms that often distort the faith and render it virtually incomprehensible to others. The Chinese rites controversy of the Sixteenth Century ought to be a constant reminder of how a narrowly construed Christianity tied to contingent forms blocks the Gospel’s universalistic impulses. The work of people like Henri Le Saux and Bede Griffiths in India and Charles de Foucauld among Muslims seems to me worthy models of an approach whose hallmark is presence.

Which brings me to another challenge. I feel that the person in the pew has not really taken up the challenge of crossing religious divides as these more rarefied attempts have, whether ecumenical or interfaith. I might ask, for instance, when was the last time you attended a Christian service of another denomination, visited a synagogue on Shabbat, found yourself in a mosque or gurudwara, or visited one of the local Hindu or Buddhist

centers. I encourage everyone to get out of their religious comfort zone and venture forth to meet “the religious other.”

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation marked some important watersheds in Catholic life: moving away from a notion of revelation as a series of propositions to one more rooted in salvation history; a balanced approach to the relationship between Scripture and Tradition; affirming the primacy of Scripture and encouraging its study by all, including the use of modern biblical methods. So we are very far from the days when in his *motu proprio, Praestantia Scripturae*, Pope Pius X “declare[d] and decree[d] that all are bound in conscience to submit to the decisions of the Biblical Commission relating to doctrine, which have been given in the past and which shall be given in the future... nor can all those escape the note of disobedience or temerity, and consequently of grave sin, who in speech or writing contradict such decisions...” And for those who did, he prescribed excommunication *latae sententiae* reserved to the Roman Pontiff (November 18, 1907).

And what do we find among the decisions of the Biblical Commission? That Moses was the chief author of the Pentateuch; that the first three chapters of Genesis contain accounts of actual events which correspond to historical truth; that David was the principal author of the Psalter; that the Book of Isaiah must be attributed to himself alone; that the Gospel of Matthew was completed before Paul came to Rome; that Luke’s Gospel was written before the siege of Jerusalem and that the Gospel of John contains properly and truly discourses of our Lord himself and not theological compositions of the writer. I could go on and on about proscribed views now taken for granted for which no threats of excommunication are being made by the pope toward those who hold them. (<http://www.pugiofidei.com/PBC.htm>; cited passim; accessed October 14, 2012).

All of which raises some interesting questions about one of *Dei Verbum*’s better-known passages where we read that “sacred tradition, sacred scripture and the magisterium of the church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others” (no. 10). The controversies at the time of the so-called Modernist Crisis should alert us to how carefully we must assess that connection and in particular teachings that do not rise to the level of dogmatic definitions *de fide*. Pope Pius X’s willingness to extend the authority of his ordinary magisterium to a Commission whose views are now almost entirely seen to have been wrong should serve as a cautionary tale. For instance, the source of much discontent in the postconciliar period has arisen when teachings proposed as definitive are said to belong to the ordinary universal magisterium of pope and bishops, and hence infallible.<sup>1</sup> But the question of how precisely to ascertain what the college of bishops, past and present, has taught, is an ongoing challenge. To question, moreover, the manner of concluding that a teaching has a certain status is more than an evasive technicality or ploy to permit dissent over teachings claimed to be non-reformable. It touches the very core of what we mean by “divine revelation” and those teachings, now rejected, about the Bible itself are a case in point.

The Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People develops some aspects of what *Lumen gentium* had already taught about Christ’s lay faithful in its respective chapter. So this decree is not about the laity *per se*, but about the apostolic task committed by the Lord to the laity as its title indicates. Note I said “by the Lord,” as one of the decree’s contributions was to dispel the notion, reminiscent of *Catholic Action*, that the laity merely undertakes by authorized extension what is really the apostolate of the hierarchy. Instead, “Lay people’s right and duty to be apostles derives from their union with Christ their head. Inserted as they are in the mystical body of Christ by baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit in confirmation, it is by the Lord himself that they are assigned to the apostolate” (no. 3). The Council goes on to note how the laity “exercise their apostolate therefore in the world as well as in the church, in the temporal order as well as the spiritual” (no. 5).

With regard to the latter venue for lay mission, clearly there has been a revolution since the Council. Under the term “lay ecclesial ministry,” with laymen and women working in communion with the ordained and forming a true *ministerium* of the local church, there has been nothing short of a transformation, in this country at least, of our understanding of service in the church. CARA recently reported that the number of professionally trained lay ecclesial ministers increased by 76 percent between 1992 and 2010. To this one must add how structures such as

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<sup>1</sup> *Lumen gentium* had already dealt with this topic when it taught that bishops “proclaim infallibly the doctrine of Christ doctrine when, even though dispersed through the world, but maintaining among themselves and with Peter’s successor the bond of communion, in authoritatively teaching matters to do with faith and morals, they are in agreement that a particular teaching must be adhered to with the obedience of faith” (no. 25). Please note, in addition, that given the pastoral nature of this Council and the generally held view that it issued no infallible teaching, we have a paradoxical case in LG where something is taught about the infallibility of the universal ordinary magisterium that is not itself infallible.

parish and diocesan pastoral councils, along with the occasional synod, have given the laity a voice that was lacking before.

So far so good. But it's that other venue -- "in the world" -- where much remains to be done, since the Council taught that the "renewal of the temporal order" was the laity's "distinctive task" (no. 7). I will share two telling anecdotes that get at the challenge. My father, whom I would describe as a "Knights of Columbus Catholic" remarked to me one Sunday after Mass how, "I could be a layman too like that guy who read at Mass this morning if I wanted to be." The other was when a diocesan official asked pastors on a given Sunday to recognize the "active laity" in the parish, to be called out at Mass and given some kind of blessing. So the usual suspects were asked to stand: lectors, ministers of Communion, catechists, etc. Left sitting in the back of the church was a cousin of mine -- like my father -- who had what I can only call a special charism of care for the sick. As soon as he heard someone he knew was in the hospital, off he went to visit. The notion of lay mission was truncated that day and reinforced the idea that what really matters is whether you are "active in the parish." This decree has a far broader vision that in my view has hardly begun to be implemented.

The Declaration on Religious Liberty, as you know, has been viewed as "the American contribution" to the Council owing to the groundbreaking work of Fr. John Courtney Murray. It is also one of those places in the Council documents where you can see a development of doctrine taking place. Whereas Pius IX had reprobated the view that "liberty of conscience and worship is each man's personal right, which ought to be legally proclaimed and asserted in every rightly constituted society" (*Quanta cura*, no. 3), the declaration makes the quantum leap, owing to the inviolable dignity of the human person, that even if error has no rights, people do. As 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Catholic convert Orestes Brownson -- no liberal he -- put it, "Error has no rights, but the man who errs has equal rights with him who errs not."

Among the gems to be found in this document are the following:

All are bound to follow their conscience faithfully in every sphere of activity so that they may come to God, who is their last end. Therefore, the individual must not be forced to act against conscience nor be prevented from acting according to conscience, especially in religious matters (no. 3);

.... the civil authority must see to it that equality of the citizens before the law, which is itself an element of the common good of society, is never violated either openly or covertly for religious reasons and that there is no discrimination between citizens (no. 6).

Of course, such statements must be balanced against those that insist on the obligation to form a correct conscience in accordance with the moral law and that the exercise of freedom must not infringe upon the common welfare or public order. Of the latter in particular, the declaration notes how, "In availing of any freedom people must respect the moral principle of personal and social responsibility: in exercising their rights individuals and social groups are bound by the moral law to have regard for the rights of others, their own duties to others and the common good of all" (no. 7).

Here of course the church charts some very difficult terrain: On the one hand, needing to uphold its convictions concerning divine precept and the right to proclaim them in the public square, and on the other affirming human rights even where their exercise is thought somehow to fall short of the truth concerning the human person. I will only suggest here that the basic development enshrined in the declaration might be extended to other tendentious issues whereby, even if error has no inherent rights in the abstract, people in the concrete do. In other words, there are resources here for making provision for what one might call an expanded notion of the "conscientious objector."

The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity presupposes, of course, the Council's teaching on religious freedom as well as the teaching contained in *Nostra aetate* and should be read in their light. Among other things, this document advanced the conviction that God does not deprive people of salvation outside the explicit precincts of the church without, however, vitiating the obligation of the church to proclaim the gospel: "So, although in ways known to himself, God can lead those who through no fault of their own are ignorant of the gospel, to that faith without which it is impossible to please him" (no. 7) since "elements of truth and grace...are found among peoples, and which are, as it were, a secret presence of God" (no. 9).

The Council also gave warrant to what has become a dominant note in missiology, namely the need to inculturate the Gospel, meaning those engaged in the mission *ad gentes* must "take over all the riches of the nations which have been given to Christ as an inheritance (cf Ps 2:8). They borrow from the customs, traditions, wisdom, teaching, arts and sciences of their people everything which could be used to praise the glory of the Creator.... [and] the christian life will be adapted to the mentality and character of each culture.... (no. 22).

This decree also gave further stimulus to what the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy had already called for, namely the restoration of the catechumenate and its associated rites. I doubt if many bishops at the time could have foreseen how these rites would come into their own even in places not usually thought of as “mission territory.” For no one at the time was using the phrase “the new evangelization” – about which the Synod of Bishops is meeting in Rome as we speak – nor typically suggesting that *ad gentes* could just as well refer to the established churches of the West as to the younger churches. Nor could the bishops have foreseen the dawn of what sociologist Philip Jenkins has termed “the next Christianity” – the shift in the axis of Christianity from the Global North to the Global South and all the challenges this poses for both sectors of the church.

I doubt even Cardinal Rugambwa of Tanzania, the first African Cardinal, elevated by John XXIII in 1960, could have imagined that half of Africa would be Christian fifty years after the Council. Nor that by 2025, 50% of the world’s Christian population would be in Africa and Latin America, and another 17% in Asia. Or how the major differences Jenkins cites between the interests and priorities of Northern versus Southern Christianity would lead in his view to tensions and fissures similar to those of the Sixteenth Century Reformations. And who could have foreseen the “reverse” of the mission *ad gentes* with so many priests from the South now serving in churches of the North?

Which brings us to the penultimate document of the Council, the Decree on the Life and Ministry of Priests. It is no secret this document was a kind of afterthought. With so much attention given to bishops by the Council someone got the idea priests were somehow forgotten and should be addressed specifically in a document of their own. One could argue this neglect presaged the crises in the priesthood about to befall the church and which continue to the present time.

The decree did, however, represent a remarkable shift away from a more cultic and sacerdotal model of the priesthood evident in the Tridentine period toward one more presbyteral and pastoral – hence, the very title of the document, *Presbyterorum ordinis*. (Notice the mistranslation of the title, something that continues throughout). For example, in a memorable and surprising passage, the Council called the “first task” of presbyters to “preach the Gospel of God to every creature” so they might “establish and increase the People of God” (no. 4). Only then are Eucharistic presidency and other sacramental roles brought into perspective. Furthermore, the priest as someone set apart is muted by the Council, which noted how, priests, yes, “are set apart in some way within the People of God, but this is not in order that they should be separated from that people or from any person, but that they should be completely consecrated to the task for which God chooses them (see Acts 13:2). They could not be the servants of Christ unless they were witnesses and dispensers of a life other than this of the earth. On the other hand they would be powerless to serve people if they remained aloof from their life and circumstances” (no. 3).

The Council also emphasized how presbyters, since they are “co-workers with the episcopal order” (no. 2), should have voice in the governance of the local church and hence presbyteral councils have become normal in the church since (cf. no. 7). But herein also lies, I think, a challenge. By repeatedly stressing that presbyters exercise their ministry “in the name of the bishop” (no. 6) and “so make him present in a certain sense in every assembly of the faithful” (no. 5), one wonders what is left for the priest’s own creativity and initiative. If at one time the priest was thought somehow to be *alter Christus*, the document seems to turn him now into *alter episcopus*. The danger here is akin to the idea a bishop is little more than the pope’s local representative, though now it’s the presbyter as the bishop’s legate. However important hierarchical collaboration is in the exercise of ministry, here again, I think the principle of subsidiarity needs to balance the principle of communion.

Other challenges facing presbyters at the present time are so well known I hesitate to mention them. So just one item: the CARA study I mentioned earlier noted that while the number of diocesan priests ordained in the United States each year has stabilized at around 400, the number needs to be around 700 per year for long-term stability and to compensate for departures, retirements, and deaths.

And now for the crowning document of the Second Vatican Council -- the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. With Belgium’s Cardinal Suenens as its principal shepherd and known throughout its tortuous process of development as the innocuous “Schema 13,” *Gaudium et spes* was a remarkable achievement whose ongoing relevance, I think, continues to the present. Despite objections at the time of its promulgation that the church should deal in general principles rather than specifics related to highly changeable issues, nevertheless its proponents won the day and gave the church a new kind of teaching.

While impossible to summarize as a whole, the Pastoral Constitution’s core affirmation concerns God who has pronounced creation good even as it awaits the revelation of the children of God in eschatological fullness. At creation’s center lies the human person in its full dignity as the image and likeness of God. Thus all history is in some way salvation history oriented to the coming of God’s reign in its fullness. Secularity, which looks to the inherent goodness and legitimate autonomy of the created order and human activity in it, is thus given a positive meaning. A principal challenge to Christian life lies precisely in overcoming the potential alienation between the “sacred” and the “secular.”

notwithstanding the inevitable tensions that arise between them. A truly Christian secularity must always navigate between an overly optimistic evaluation of the world, one that could end up identifying the earthly with the heavenly kingdom, and an overly pessimistic one that would so disassociate them that an equally unhealthy dualism would arise. Both extremes end up betraying Christians' paradoxical calling out of the world while being left to live in it.

To conclude, I would like to make a final comprehensive evaluation of the Council taking my cue from the late Cardinal Martini who thought the Catholic Church is two hundred years out of date, reminiscent of something I remember Karl Rahner saying: "The church always runs weeping after the cart of history." So while Vatican II is often interpreted as the church catching up with modernity, hence the fuller title of *Gaudium et spes*, the problem is that modernity, even fifty years ago, was already showing signs of exhaustion. The new catchphrase bandied about to describe a new epoch has been termed "postmodern," and by the 1960s the church was already late in dealing with a corresponding "postmodernist crisis."

For our purposes, let me mention just a few markers of postmodernity: first, there is what Edward Farley calls "the collapse of the house of authority" causing the very notion of a magisterium to appear suspect. Related to this is the absence of an overarching metanarrative -- a story that large swaths of people inhabit giving meaning to their lives. The ever more pluralistic "secular city" is also termed post-Christian for this very reason. Then there is the insight that all knowledge is socially constructed and most often articulated through the lens of power interests, leading to a growing suspicion of any universal "truth-claims," and how the voices of the oppressed and subjugated "other" have been muffled by history's victors including, often enough, the church as a socio-political entity. I mention here "women's ways of knowing" having come to the fore in the last half-century, spearheaded in the church by the remarkable women "observers" at Vatican II like Sister Mary Luke Tobin and Rosemary Goldie.

So one could understand the aftermath of the Council as the unexpected and little understood hurricane of a postmodernist ethos let into Pope John's opened windows. In many ways, the Council was, yes, very late in coming, its hoped-for "updating" bound to be awkward and uncertain. Hence, when the First Council of Nairobi is convoked by Pope Charles Lwanga I, hopefully in time to address postmodernity in a meaningful and effective fashion, the church won't be running after a world that has already moved on and can no longer understand its message, thus sparing itself the inevitable backlashes, but would speak instead to the "joys and hopes, the grief and anguish," of whatever age in which it finds itself -- for the pilgrim church must remember, as Blessed Pope John said in his opening speech to the assembled bishops, that 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 thus, as Paul VI remarked at the close of the Council, the church will truly have "felt the need to know, to draw near to, to understand, to penetrate, serve and evangelize the society in which she lives; and to get to grips with it, almost to run after it, in its rapid and continuous change."



**Athens Archaeological Museum: Funerary Mask of Agamemnon  
(Photo by MC)**