

Reflecting on Vatican Council II 60 Years Later

By Catherine Michaud, CSJ, Ph.D.

In a Mass in St. Peter's Basilica on Oct. 11 celebrating the 60th anniversary of the opening of Vatican II, Pope Francis said the Council was “one great response” to the question “Do you love me?” posed by Christ to his disciples.



“To rekindle her love for the Lord, the church, for the first time in her history, devoted a council to examining herself and reflecting on her nature and mission,” the pope said. “She saw herself once more as a mystery of grace generated by love; she saw herself anew as the people of God, the body of Christ, the living temple of the Holy Spirit!”¹ He exclaimed, “If [the Church] should fail to rejoice, she would deny her very self, for she would forget the love that begot her.”²

Pope St. John XXIII inaugurated Vatican Council II with a unique purpose among all 21 ecumenical councils: To address concerns for the “soul” of the Church, rescuing it from its medieval past and planting it in the modern world — using the Italian word *aggiornamento*. He made it clear that this



Council was not needed to address doctrinal matters as the other councils had; rather, it would be

¹ Christopher White, “Pope Francis marks 60th anniversary of Vatican II opening by pleading for the church to overcome polarization,” *Commonweal* (October 11, 2022).

² Michael Sean Winters, “Vatican II at 60: Is Pope Francis or Ross Douhat Right?” *National Catholic Reporter* (October 14, 2022).

a “pastoral council.” The substance of its seminal teachings is the nature of the Church itself. Vatican Council I had intended to define the nature of the Church, but its work was interrupted by the Franco Prussian War in 1870. Vatican II would complete that work.

As we begin the celebration of the Council’s 60th anniversary, I experience both gratitude and a little regret — that my mother who loved “Good Pope John” and rejoiced in the work of the Council did not live long enough to help celebrate this very special anniversary in which we are seeing at last the prophecy of Pope John becoming reality; and gratitude that I am living long enough to celebrate this.

In the 1990s my doctoral work led me on a challenging odyssey through the Council *Proceedings* and each of the Documents to ascertain whether the Council had authentically committed itself to following the Holy Spirit at the bidding of Pope John, to truly experiencing the radical transformation through the New Pentecost that he announced. I learned about the conversations among the Roman Catholic theologians at the Council and theologians from the other churches, especially the Eastern churches who were astounded that we “Westerners” would attempt to produce documents on the nature of the Church without a developed theology of the Holy Spirit, known as *pneumatology*. For, it is the Spirit who conceived the Church. These conversations demonstrated the value and transforming nature of ecumenical councils where the Spirit speaks through the *whole* Body of Christ!

My doctoral dissertation, *Pneumatology in Vatican II: Forward Steps and Open Questions*, laid out the evidence of movement in the Council’s thought compared with previous councils and to the initial work of the Council’s Preparatory Commissions and committees away from “a nontemporal, static, and very juridical view” of the Church toward “a historical,

dynamic and sacramental view, one progressively more open to the contribution of pneumatology.”³

My dissertation closes with this statement:

The pneumatology of the Council is the outstanding feature of this ecclesial process, both in theory and in praxis. It is not fully formed nor perfectly balanced, but it is a vital component of the Council’s theological achievement. (243)

Since I wrote those words, I have been waiting . . . waiting . . . for what I saw as the most significant grace of the Council to be received and become a concrete reality. The Church has awaited enactment of the structure needed to facilitate the Spirit speaking through the Body of Christ to the Church and the world: The synod.

Five and half years after Pope Francis delivered “what can be called his magna carta on synodality” to the Synod of Bishops in 2015, his persistent push for a synodal Church is having effects. All over the Catholic world, synods are now being prepared and the Spirit shared through them is bringing Catholic communities to life.⁴ As the Council envisioned: “All the faithful, scattered though they be throughout the world, are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit” (*Lumen gentium* 13). The means for this communion is the synod process.

When Vatican Council II took up the tasks of *aggiornamento* and completing the work of Vatican I, it became arguably the most important event in Christianity since the Protestant Reformation. This Council consigned the most important work of the Church in modern history to all of us, its baptized members. Our first task is the critical work of “reception” of the Council’s spirit and teachings. Tragically, until now most Catholics have only the barest knowledge of the Council, and sometimes what they have come to believe is distorted.

How can the People of God “receive” what they do not know?

³ Yves Congar, *Informations Catholiques Internationales* 224 (Sept. 15, 1964): 1.

⁴ Massimo Faggioli, “Synodality and Papal Primacy: Questions Regarding the Catholic Church Today and the Next Pope, *La Croix International* and *National Catholic Reporter* (May 3, 2021).

Reading, discussing, and meditating on the Council documents is critical to understanding and implementing its teachings. Four things, I suggest, that might to help us in this work as we celebrate the Council's 60th anniversary are an understanding of (1) how the Council addressed the "soul" of the Church — its spiritual life, rather than its administrative needs; (2) the melding of motives among the majority voices in the Council where the spirit of the Council still speaks; (3) the lingering effects of the minority voices in the Council who feared losing the Church's "tradition;" and (4) the events since the Council's 50th anniversary affecting the reception of Vatican Council II now.

(1) The Council and the "soul" of the Church

Pope St. John XXIII sensed a sickness in Body of Christ: the soul of the Church was separating from the Body. Some 400 years had passed since the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the last complete ecumenical council. On the strength of that Council, Roman Catholicism had recuperated from the Reformation, reformed the seminaries, and, among other things, ensured that no more scandalous candidates inhabited the papacy. Despite these important accomplishments, and maybe because of them, the Church grew distant from the world that it is intended to serve. It remained unchanged, a medieval institution that year by year became more threatened by the modern world. Pope John prescribed the remedy of *aggiornamento* — a transfusion of life by way of a New Pentecost, new life breathed into the soul and Body of the Church. He knew that the treatment had to be bold and thorough. And so he convened the Church's first *Pastoral Council*.

Karl Rahner (one of the leading theologians at the Council) remarked that Vatican II, "in all of its sixteen [documents] constitutions, decrees, and declarations was concerned with the Church." ... The various conciliar documents were [composed] by distinct commissions, working at different rhythms, in the face of different problems and for different purposes, a lack of coordination and of systematic interest that was not entirely offset by the fact that on many of them the same experts played

major roles (I think in particular of Msgr. Gerard Philips and of Fr. Yves Congar). Thus, for example, the *Constitution on the Liturgy* was completed before the *Constitution on the Church* and the latter before the *Constitutions on Divine Revelation* and on the *Church in the Modern World*.⁵

Moreover, ecclesialogist Joseph Komonchak explains that on several points, “the Council deliberately chose not to settle important issues” but instead to state their terms as best they could and then leave them for “future inspiration” when theologians and others could work out more coherent articulations than was possible at the time. These choices reveal the Council’s commitment to be led by the Holy Spirit rather than attempt to “lead the Spirit.”⁶

Komonchak also calls attention to the Council’s distinctive rhetorical style — as somewhat wide-ranging, meditative, and evocative than the more propositional language and argument or apologetic style of earlier councils.⁷ The Council’s The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*), for example, often speaking to the heart, opens with the declaration that “Christ is the Light of nations. Because this is so, this Sacred Synod gathered together in the Holy Spirit eagerly desires, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature, to bring the light of Christ to all ... a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church.”

Before Vatican II, the Church’s understanding of itself held that “the Spirit of God was the soul of the Church,” and that the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit were mediated by the ordained Hierarchy who carried out its functions legally, through Church laws and rules. The baptized members did not see themselves as Christ’s Body; they knew the Holy Spirit, for example, through a sprinkling at baptism and an anointing at confirmation. The “soul” of the Church that resides in the hearts of the baptized faithful expressing itself in the gifts and fruits of the Holy

⁵ Joseph A. Komonchak, “Ecclesiology of Vatican II,” Speech (Catholic Univ. of America, March 27, 1999).

⁶ Komonchak, “Ecclesiology of Vatican II.”

⁷ Komonchak, “Ecclesiology of Vatican II.”

Spirit was barely discernible. The People of God, for the most part, were silent, passive, meekly obedient, or absent. The graces of the Holy Spirit parsed out through the Hierarchy within the juridical, institution model of Church moved the compassionate heart of Pope John XXIII to bold action. He viewed the baptized faithful as the disciples of Christ commissioned to bring about the Reign of God. In the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) the Council states:

Through this holy synod, the Lord renews His invitation to all the laity to come closer to Him every day, recognizing that what is His is also their own (Phil. 2:5), to associate themselves with Him in His saving mission. Once again He sends them into every town and place where He will come (cf. Luke 10:1) so that they may show that they are co-workers in the various forms and modes of the one apostolate of the Church, which must be constantly adapted to the new needs of our times... they know that their labor in Him is not in vain (cf. 1 Cor. 15:58) (AA 33).

For the Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate. No part of the structure of a living body is merely passive but has a share in the functions as well as life of the body: so, too, in the body of Christ, which is the Church, “the whole body ... in keeping with the proper activity of each part, derives its increase from its own internal development” (Eph. 4:16). (AA 2)

The Church revitalized by Vatican II knows itself as the Body of Christ, which like Christ himself, is by nature both human and divine. The Church, a “mystery,” a sacrament, that makes the invisible Christ present on earth is also the “People of God” carrying on Christ’s earthly mission *humanly*. Comprised of the baptized members, especially the laity, each is anointed to complete Christ’s mission to bring about God’s Reign.

(2) Majority voices

The majority voices in the Council melded their motives together to create a force like a powerful wind that could move an enormous old ship onto a reverse course. Perhaps originating with Pope John himself, that melding aroused the Council members to take concerted, quite courageous **action toward a shared goal**. It surmounted obstacles such as theological, pastoral,

ecclesial differences (fights!) among the members. These “motivations” solidified into some specific points that now define the Vatican II Church. For example, in the efforts made during the Council to achieve unanimity and express the consensus of the whole voting body; in the bishops’ struggle to harmonize the differing views and to listen carefully to the minority voices — to the extent of adopting deliberate ambiguities. Walter Kasper reflects on the example of the Council’s unified motivation as the willingness to wait upon the Spirit for a fuller agreement, an attitude revealing, in part, the majority voices in the Council:

The Council didn’t want any newly “enlightened” Church; it wanted a church spiritually renewed through the Spirit of the Gospel on the way to both personal sanctification and (institutional) reform. The Council at no point left behind the traditional teaching on the Church; rather it placed it in a pastoral horizon, which means (as still needs to be shown) in a trinitarian horizon of understanding; it has indicated the way out of an identity that is closed in on itself and blockaded toward an open, relational, and dialogically understood identity of the Church.⁸

At the 50-year mark Catholics questioned themselves about where they were in relation to the Council: Had we experienced the Church as a people reborn in the “New Pentecost”? Was the Church experienced around the world as Karl Rahner described at the closing of the Council, a “world religion” that is open to other religions? Did the Council create a Church that had compromised continuity with tradition as some in the Council feared it would, in order to embrace modern notions of development, or secularism? Did the Council actually nurture division among the People of God by going too far to accommodate the sometimes-schismatic minority voices? Did Pope John XXIII make a mistake in calling for a “Pastoral” Ecumenical Council that requires members to grow beyond the doctrinal, juridical, institutional notions of church? To grow up and grow beyond the designation of the “simple faithful” into their identity as adult disciples of Christ?

⁸ Walter Kasper, *Katholische Kirche: Wesen-Wirklichkeit-Sendung* (Freiburg: Herder, 2011), p. 37.

Typically, the task of reception of a Council takes around 100 years, and the task falls ultimately to the faithful Catholic people in the pews, but our historical situation is unique. Walter Kasper believes “the Council was not only the ending of a development [a juridical, triumphalist religious institution], but the starting point for new developments and for new spiritual departures, that thank goodness arise alongside many losses and failures.”⁹

Massimo Faggioli reflects on Karl Rahner’s perspective that Vatican II is “a beacon for the future of the Church,” but also a transitional moment in the long history of the Church. “The Council made a new start possible and legitimate.”¹⁰

While the bishops at Vatican II affirmed the necessity of the Church’s witness to holiness — hearts and minds filled with desire for God and for Heaven, as Pope Benedict XVI urged — they saw the Church as the Body that “strains toward the completed Kingdom,” meaning *the world transformed in justice and love*, a world that “cannot be transformed and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes.”¹¹ In the opening paragraph of *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* they orient the Church to the service of unity of all people on earth as:

The present-day conditions of the world add greater urgency to this work of the Church [“union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” — its universal mission] so that all men [people], joined more closely today by various social, technical and cultural ties, might also attain fuller unity in Christ.

In *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* the Council asks:

What needs to be recommended for the upbuilding of contemporary society? What is the ultimate significance of human activity throughout the world? People are waiting for an answer to these questions. From the answers it will be increasingly clear that the People of God and the human race in whose midst it lives render service to each other. Thus the mission of the Church will show **its religious**, and

⁹ Kasper, p. 38.

¹⁰ Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (Mahwah, New Jersey, 2012), p. 120. Quoting Karl Rahner, “The Abiding Significance of the Second Vatican Council,” *Concern for the Church (Theological Investigations XX)*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 96.

¹¹ *Lumen gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), *Documents of Vatican Council II*, #5, #31.

by that very fact, **its supremely human** character. . . . (*emphasis mine*) (*Gaudium et spes*, #11)

The Church ... has no fiercer desire than that in pursuit of the welfare of all she may be able to develop herself freely under any kind of government which grants recognition to the basic rights of person and family, to the demands of the common good and to the free exercise of her own mission. (*Gaudium et spes*, #42)

(3) Minority voices

The Council’s achievements were hard won; serious disagreements arose at almost every turn. Father O’Malley remembers that the “great battles” in the Council were battles over the Church’s identity. They were not disagreements over Church teachings — by Pope John’s design Vatican II was not a “doctrinal” council. No, the battles that took place during the Council were over tradition, over the understanding of who the Catholic people have become through the centuries, and how “change” figures into the unfolding of our identity and our mission as Church in a fast-moving modern world.¹²

During the celebration of the 60th anniversary Mass Pope Francis himself “lamented that those changes had sometimes led to deep divisions within the church.”

“How often, in the wake of the Council, did Christians prefer to choose sides in the church, not realizing that they were breaking their mother’s heart! How many times did they prefer to cheer on their own party rather than being servants of all? To be progressive or conservative rather than being brothers and sisters?” he asked.¹³

The minority voices in the Council, not to be forgotten, continue to express a certain fear of losing the Church’s “tradition.” A look “inside” at the Council debates — at “the conversations, confrontations, compromises, and conciliations” — reveals who some of the key participants were whose perspectives are still affecting the Church 60 years later.

¹² O’Malley, pp. 42-43.

¹³ Christopher White, “Pope Francis Marks 60th Anniversary of Vatican II Opening by Pleading for the Church to Overcome Polarization, *National Catholic Reporter* (October 11, 2022).

Massimo Faggioli among other Vatican II scholars categorizes the Council participants as the “reformers,” the “traditionalists,” and the “*sedevacantists*” who believe that the Chair of Peter has been vacant since the death of Pope Pius XII in 1958. They believe Pius’ successor, John XXIII, acted heretically in calling for the Council, and then Pope Paul VI acted heretically as Pope John’s successor to promulgate the Documents of Vatican II. Consequently, strict sedevacantists recognize Pope Pius XII as the last legitimate Pope.

A leader among the sedevacantists was Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (1905-1991), whom Pope John XXIII assigned to the Preparatory Commission of the Council in 1959. During the Council, however, Lefebvre and a small group of around 70 bishops formed a bloc they called *Coetus Internationalis Patrum* (or CIP; Latin for *International Group of Fathers*) with the purpose of guaranteeing that their views were part of every council discussion. They became active in the second session of the Council when they rallied against the movement to establish *collegiality* — meaning the participation of bishops in governing the Church — as one of the defining features of governance within the Church. Lefebvre deemed this and the pastoral nature of the Council as serious weaknesses. For a number of reasons he concluded that Vatican II was “the work of the devil against the Church.”¹⁴ Although the CIP remained small, the members were active in their protest voting, and in their refusal to network with the episcopal conferences within the Council. They considered participation in these conferences to be expressions of *collegiality*, and chose to remain isolated.

The “traditionalists” within the Council were referred to as the minority. They coexisted with the majority to accomplish the political and theological work of the Council. From the

¹⁴ Faggioli, pp. 34-35.

beginning to the end they opposed the direction the Council took on almost every issue: liturgical reform, reform of the Roman Curia, ecumenism, religious freedom, the role of the Church in the modern world, and on the idea that the Church can change.¹⁵ As debates continued from October 1962 to December 1965, however, some members of the conservative minority began to see the need for change and voted with the majority to accept the 16 documents produced by the Council.

The steadfast traditionalists within the Council included Cardinal Giuseppe Siri and Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani whose motto was *Semper idem* (“always the same”), and they kept fighting even after the Council for their interpretation of the event. They viewed the Council as a “dangerous and potentially catastrophic event for the Catholic Church,” but they remained members of the Church which did not change as drastically as they had feared it would.¹⁶

There was also a tiny group of ultraconservative bishops who joined Lefebvre’s group, holding on to their conviction that the Council was illegitimate.¹⁷ They formed their own schismatic Society of St. Pius X, named for the pope who condemned Modernism in his 1907 Encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*.

The “reformers,” often impugned as radical in their understanding of the purpose of the Council and later in their interpretation of it, included personages like Cardinal Leo Jozef Suenens, theologians Yves Congar, Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, Hans Küng, and after the Council the bishops who did not fear the challenge of implementing the Council in their dioceses and in the universal Church. Nor, says Faggioli, “did they fear debating with Paul VI on how to apply some of the most delicate aspects of the Council.” They spoke out about the real need for collegiality in the Church.¹⁸

¹⁵ Faggioli, pp. 24-25.

¹⁶ Faggioli, p. 25.

¹⁷ Faggioli, pp. 25-26.

¹⁸ Faggioli, pp. 21-22.

(4) The last decade: 50th anniversary on

In the 10 years since the church celebrated the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Vatican Council II, a series of important events have deeply affected the lives and faith of the Catholics around the world. Among them are:

1. Pope Benedict XVI resigned Feb. 28, 2013, just four months after the 50 anniversary of the Council's opening.
2. Jorge Mario Bergoglio, a Cardinal and Jesuit from Argentina, was elected two weeks later on March 13, 2013. He took Francis as his papal name.
3. Pope Francis is the first pope since Vatican II who did not personally participate in the Council.
4. In short order, Pope Francis began preaching against clericalism and staffing offices in the Vatican with lay people, many of them women.
5. Pope Francis set about establishing the essential structure designated by the Council for listening to the Holy Spirit in the Body of Christ: the institution-wide, worldwide synod.
6. Pope Francis began publishing encyclicals and papal letters to advance the teachings of Vatican II, with special attention to the Gospels and the Constitutions on the Church.
 - *Evangelii gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)* in 2013: an apostolic exhortation issued eight months into his papacy, a “programmatically” for his pontificate.
 - *Laudato si' (Praise Be to You)* in 2015: an encyclical letter on the environment, “On care for our common home.”
 - *Amoris laetitia (The Joy of Love)* in 2016: an apostolic exhortation “On love in the family.”
 - *Gaudete et exsultate (Rejoice and Be Glad)* in 2018: an apostolic exhortation “On the call to holiness in today's world.”
 - *Christus vivit (Christ is Alive)* in 2018: an apostolic exhortation “To young people and to the whole people of God.”
 - *Fratelli tutti (Brethren all)* in 2019: an encyclical letter “On fraternity and social friendship.”

Catholics' experiences and understanding of the Council, their understanding of the Church and their role in it, and their concrete sense of their catholicity, especially their membership in a world-church are all enhanced through the synodal process. Catholics are participating in their local communities and sharing their faith (*sensus fidelium*) in their local churches. The Catholic people's expressed faith and hopes are becoming their contributions to

the direction of the universal church. This new engagement of the People of God in the spirit of Vatican II witnesses to a new health in the Body of Christ, a maturity, and commitment to the Gospel and to Christ.

In Conclusion

At the 60-year mark of the opening of Vatican Council II, the late church historian John O'Malley, SJ, invites us to compare the Council's achievements thus far with the hopes of the Catholic people before the Council began. They were polled about their hopes which reflected the longing for a "springtime" in the Church. O'Malley said those hopes 60 years ago included:



- an affirmation of the dignity of the laity;
- a long-overdue modification of the predominantly clerical, institutional, hierarchical model of Church;
- efforts to heal divisions among Christians and the Church's relations with non-Christian religions;
- an end to the Church's stance of cultural isolation;
- embracing a new freedom of expression and action within the Church;
- a more broadly exercised pastoral authority, especially a strengthening of the role of the bishops as a body and the importance of the local churches in relation to the Pope and the Curia;
- renovating the Church's teaching on "religious liberty" with strengthened support for the principle of "freedom of conscience;"
- better grounding of theology and biblical studies on historical principles;
- liturgies and styles of piety in keeping with openness, freedom of conscience and social responsibility;
- promoting a more positive appreciation of "the world" in "the new era."¹⁹

Many of these still await fulfillment. But there is greater hope when the Holy Spirit is provided a way to enter our lives and the Church. Vatican Council II provided the way.

¹⁹ John W. O'Malley, *Tradition and Transition: Historical Perspectives on Vatican II* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1989), p. 25. The wording of items in this list is slightly modified from O'Malley's. See also Hans Ansgar Reinhold, "The Expectations of the Faithful," *Looking toward the Council*, ed. Joseph E. Cunneen (New York: Herder and Herder, 1962), pp. 82–89.