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VATICAN II FIFTY YEARS LATER

Reflection by Fr. Reginald Martin, O.P.

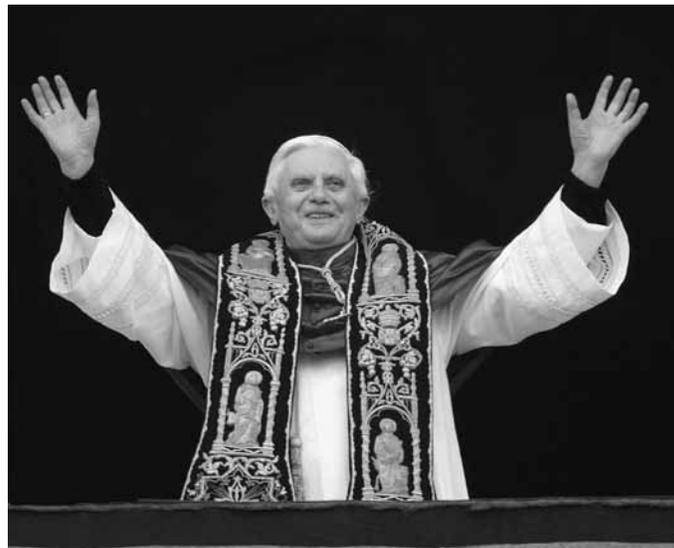
On October 11, 1962, when I was a 14-year old sophomore in high school, the Church celebrated the opening of the Second Vatican Council. As I look back, I confess I was somewhat underwhelmed – in fact, I’m not sure I even noticed. Perhaps I was too busy looking forward to Columbus Day, which was still a holiday at that time.

In any case, the event held none of the world-stopping drama of the assassination of John Kennedy, which occurred exactly six weeks later. That was the feast of St. Cecilia, and we were in the middle of our Latin class, when the principal came to the room to tell us school was dismissed for the day.

Pope John XXIII announced that the Council was to address relations between the Church and the modern world. Few will deny that it has succeeded. Of those who took part in the council's opening session, four have become popes: Giovanni Battista Montini, who became Paul VI, Bishop Albino Luciani, the future Pope John Paul I, Bishop Karol Wojtyła, who became Pope John Paul II, and Father Joseph Ratzinger, present as a theological consultant, who was elected to serve as Pope Benedict XVI.

The initial session of the Council adjourned on December 8, and commissions began working on sessions scheduled for 1963. These preparations, however, were halted upon the death of Pope John XXIII on June 3, 1963, since an ecumenical council is automatically dissolved upon the death of the Pope who convened it. Pope Paul VI was elected on June 21, 1963 and he immediately announced that the Council would continue.

When the Council resumed its work, on September 29, 1963, Pope Paul stressed the pastoral nature of the council, and announced the beginning of a dialogue with the contemporary world as one of its purposes. To honor the anniversary of the Council, we will interrupt



Pope Benedict XVI

our reflections on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, and in this and the next issue of *Light and Life* we will consider – very briefly – three of the Council documents that laid the foundation for what, half a century later, we may rightly call the Church’s “New Evangelization.”

When I read these documents for the first time, as assignments, in the seminary I found them fuel for naps. Coming back to them after nearly forty years of ordained priesthood, I’m amazed at how much they’ve improved. The first thing I noticed is how the documents have established not just the accepted vocabulary, but the entire world-view of the Church that we take for granted today.

One of the documents we’ll consider is that addressing the apostolate of the laity. Listen to what the Council Fathers wrote: “*Christ gave the apostles and their successors the task of teaching, sanctifying and governing in his own name and with his power.*” To be sure, this is nothing more than we’ve all grown up with. Bishops and priests are in charge. But listen to what comes next.

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THE ROSARY LIGHT & LIFE

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

Vatican II & An Emerging Lay Apostolate

Reflection by Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

In October, 1966, a year after the Council drew to its close, our present Pope, who was then Fr. Joseph Ratzinger, published a book of reflections on the work of the Council, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*. In this volume he observes that the document on the relation of the Church to non-Christians originated as a document on the Church's relation to the Jews. Obviously, the Council Fathers greatly expanded the scope of the text as the Council proceeded. Ratzinger says, "True, the final text appears in some respects somewhat weakened. The basic statements, however, remain unchanged. And compared to everything that previously existed in regard to the relation between the Church and Israel, it really was a new page in the book of Catholic-Jewish relations."

That we read the document today as so much more than an outreach to our sisters and brothers who embrace the Old Covenant is undeniable testimony to the truth of Ratzinger's comment. And the overwhelming vote of the Council (2,221 in favor, compared to a mere 88 opposed and 2 abstaining) is evidence that, even at the time, the bishops at the Council saw the value of the document – not only as a (perhaps long-overdue) affirmation of individuals' religious rights, but an equally long-awaited encouragement of the laity's duty to embrace their mission as an evangelizing and leavening agent in the world.

A MINISTRY FOR ALL

The Council's *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Apostolicam Actuositatem)*, which was issued a month later, on November 18, 1965, makes even clearer the obligation of lay Catholics to take an active role in the Church's mission to the world.

Every activity of the Mystical Body...goes by the name of 'apostolate': the Church exercises it through all its members...In fact, the Christian vocation is, of its nature, a vocation to the apostolate as well...In the organism of a living body no member plays a purely passive part. Sharing in the life of the body it shares at the same time in its activity...In the concrete [the laity's] apostolate is exercised when they work at the evangelization and sanctification of men; it is exercised too when they endeavor to have the Gospel spirit permeate and improve the temporal order....

THE FRUIT OF BAPTISM

This document is clear to observe that the role of sanctifying and ordering is not one that individuals claim

for themselves; it is an outcome of Baptism into the Mystical Body of Christ, strengthened by Confirmation and nourished by the Eucharist. In addition, the Holy Spirit pours out the special gifts we have been considering in these reflections, "allotting them to each one as he wills" (1 Cor. 12:7) so God's kingdom may become a reality on earth. Employing these gifts, together with one's natural talents, is a Christian's right and a duty. Working with others, cooperatively with one's pastor, is the effective way to exercise this right, and achieve the ends for which the Spirit's gifts are intended.

In his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, St. Francis de Sales remarks "At the creation God commanded the plants to bear fruit according to its kind and he likewise commands Christians, the living branches of the vine, to bear fruit by practicing devotion according to their state in life." He is quite clear that "The practice of devotion must differ for each person," he says,

...depending on how each is situated...it is not only erroneous, but a heresy to hold that life in the army, the workshop...or the home is incompatible with devotion. Purely contemplative, monastic or religious devotion cannot be practiced in these callings... [but] wherever we find ourselves we not only may, but should, seek perfection.

A COMMON VOCATION WITH MARY

The Council document echoes this common-sense approach to Christian perfection, and without mentioning any society or institute by name, commends those associations that bring the faithful together so that they may pray and work in common and not only derive strength from one another, but see in their common enterprise a sign of the Body of Christ our Baptism calls us to build up with one another. Anyone who is close to Dominicans will be delighted that the Council Fathers identify the Blessed Virgin as the exemplar of these attitudes. "The perfect model of this apostolic spiritual life," the document states

is the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Apostles. While on earth her life was like that of any other, filled with labors and the cares of the home; always, however, she remained intimately united to her Son and cooperated in an entirely unique way in the Savior's work. And now, assumed into heaven, "her motherly love keeps her attentive to her Son's brothers, still on pilgrimage amid the dangers and difficulties of life, until they arrive at the happiness of the fatherland" Everyone should have a genuine devotion to her and entrust his life to her motherly care.

A GIFT TO BE SHARED

A maxim of our faith teaches that a gift is never given simply to enrich the one who receives it; rather, it is given to enrich the entire Church. This is the principle underlying everything taught in the Council's decree on the laity. Individuals are invited to seek perfection so they may, in turn, perfect the world.

Priests may be entrusted primary responsibility for ministry of the word and sacraments, but this is often an internal ministry, exercised to and among those who are already initiated into the Catholic faith. Lay Catholics, by definition, have the advantage – as well as the challenge – of living “in the world,” where the light of their example can bring the brightness and healing warmth of Christ's light on a number of ills. Members of the Order of Malta may easily imagine the framers of the Council document had the Prayer of the Order before them when they observed

At a time when new questions are being put and when grave errors aiming at undermining religion, the moral order and human society itself are rampant, the Council earnestly exhorts the laity to take a more active part, each according to his talents and knowledge in fidelity to the mind of the Church, in the explanation and defense of Christian principles and in the correct application of them to the problems of our times...

The greatest commandment of the law is to love God with one's whole heart and one's neighbor as oneself... That is why mercy to the poor and the sick, and charitable works and works of mutual aid for the alleviation of all kinds of human needs, are held in special honor in the Church.

THE MISSION TO THE WORLD

The last of the Conciliar documents we will consider in this reflection is *The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (Ad Gentes Divinitus)*, issued on December 7, 1965. This document concerns itself particularly with what we commonly term the Church's “foreign missionary” apostolate, but its general principles are quite valuable to the present discussion, as they lay the foundation for any evangelical enterprise.

First among these principles is the acknowledgment that God wishes all peoples to be saved “...and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, himself a man, Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all.” (1 Tim 2:4) God can – indeed, does – lead individuals to Himself who would otherwise have no knowledge of Him. But the more ordinary means of salvation is the outreach of the Church, which the Council document terms “the sacred right to evangelize.”

In his first letter, when St. John describes the dynamic of the virtue of charity (1 Jn. 3:10) he tells us that God's love enables us first to love Him, and then to love His creation. We manifest this love in many ways, but one concrete way is the preaching example of our lives,

which demonstrates how God's presence enables us to overcome sin and weakness, and strive for the perfection that clarifies in each of us the image of Christ.

This, after all, is the reason Jesus took on our flesh. The Council document quotes St. Athanasius, who preached that “*what was not assumed by Christ was not healed.*” Our words, but especially the example of our lives, are

...nothing else, and nothing less, than the manifestation of God's plan, its epiphany and realization in the world and in history... It purges of evil associations those elements of truth and grace which are found among peoples... and it restores them to Christ their source who overthrows the rule of the devil and limits the manifold malice of evil... Thus missionary activity tends toward eschatological fullness, by it the people of God is expanded to the degree and until the time that the Father has fixed by his own authority....

The remainder of the document deals with the practical details of missionary activity in foreign countries. These reflections are aptly observed and profoundly moving, but because they are so carefully directed toward a specialized apostolate, they need not necessarily concern us here. More important for our purpose are the general considerations we have just mentioned.

RECONSIDERING TRADITIONAL VALUES

We ought to note, however, that Ratzinger observes the document encountered difficulty in the Council because by the middle of the last century “...the idea had more and more come to prevail that God can and wants to save all men even though outside the Church, although ultimately not without the Church.” In other words, optimists felt that salvation was, ultimately, God's business, and efforts to establish Christianity (which were often identified with efforts to impose European values) were doomed to failure.

Those opposed to this view argued that a European religion – albeit a thoroughly secular one, namely communism – had successfully succeeded in establishing itself throughout the world. Why, then, should Christianity fail? Quoting the Council Fathers, Ratzinger asks,

If it is a fact that human history moves relentlessly toward unification of mankind, then this unification must be more than a mere economic unification through technological achievement. It must become unification in view of human values, unification of the spirit and of what is highest in the human spirit, its relationship to God.

Twenty-five years after the Council, the world watched – astounded – as Communism's seemingly impenetrable Iron Curtain fell, to usher in a Brave New World of economic experimentation. We have yet to see whether the Council's dream of a unification of spirit will follow. Signs in many of the newly-emerging free

Eastern European economies – Lithuania, Bohemia, Hungary, and Poland to name but four – are quite encouraging, but a glance at the newspaper suggests that the economically developed world seems more intent on further amassing and consolidating its gains than striving for the spiritual unification the Council envisioned as the end of missionary activity.

NEXT STEPS

Current history presents us with some options unanticipated by the bishops who prepared the Council's document of missionary activity. We can lament the state of world affairs, or we can view the Council documents as a mirror in which we see ourselves and our society's need for evangelization. This is a vastly less comfortable picture than one in which other people carry the gospel to strange-looking individuals in odd-sounding, distant locations, but it may be far more to the point.

The Council's decree on missionary activity observes,

The principal duty of both men and women is to bear witness to Christ, and this they are obliged to do by their life and their words, in the family, in their social group, and in the sphere of their profession. In them must be seen the new man who has been created according to God in justice and holiness of truth." The paragraph goes on to describe how professional and social association with others exerts a positive effect in establishing the fundamental ties that bring non-Christians to the Church. Half a century ago the Vatican Council imagined this would take place somewhere else; today we must assume that we will be the agents who will forge the moral and spiritual links that unite us to our next-door neighbors. ■

VATICAN II FIFTY YEARS LATER (continued from page 1)

Lay people have also been made sharers in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ, and thus they exercise their proper role in the mission of the whole people of God, both within the Church, and in the secular order...They are consecrated into the holy people of God and His royal priesthood in order that, through all their activities, they will be offering spiritual sacrifices and thus witness Christ through all the world.

I was a layman in 1965, when this document was promulgated. At a stretch I could have accepted the idea of a lay prophetic apostolate, but the notion of sharing Christ's priestly or royal ministry would have seemed altogether preposterous. Today – in fact for nearly two decades – some of my Dominican brothers, together with their lay associates in the St. Catherine of Siena Institute, have travelled around the world, helping parish congregations realize and embrace just those charisms.

Another remarkable aspect of some of these Conciliar documents is their brevity – and what they are able to convey in very few words. *The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*

(*Nostra Aetate*), issued on October 28, 1965, consists of fewer than five pages, but it is a straightforward acknowledgment of each believer's rights. It states, "Indeed, the Church reproves every form of persecution against whomsoever it may be directed." That it is, thus, an irenic call to inter-cultural dialogue, will come as no surprise.

But the document does not veer even slightly from the traditional profession of our faith, so it is equally an unapologetic call to the Church's missionary apostolate.

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these [non-Christian] religions... Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (Jn 1:6)...The Church, therefore, urges her [children] to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truth found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture....

Perhaps most noteworthy about this document – we see it reflected in the language of this paragraph – is the absence of any suggestion that the Church's outreach to non-Christians is, or even should be, the sole undertaking of the clergy. "Evangelization," "mission," and "dialogue" are not nouns that describe activities we can comfortably assign to others; The Council document intends us to see these tasks as responsibilities we embrace at our Baptism, when we, like the Apostles, hear Jesus telling us, "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations." (Mt. 29:18) ■

SPECIAL AUTUMN PRAYERS

The months of October and November are a special time for the Rosary Center and its friends and benefactors. On October 7 we celebrate the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, a reminder of the great naval victory that took place at Lepanto on that date, in 1571, when Christians defeated a much larger Moslem naval force – a victory the Christian sailors attributed to their praying the Rosary. To honor the feast, we will offer a novena of Masses for you and your intentions, beginning on September 29.

November is the month of the Holy Souls, a time we traditionally pray for the dead. Throughout the month we will pray for all your family members and friends who have died, asking God to deliver them from Purgatory and welcome them into His kingdom. We encourage you to use the form enclosed in this copy of *Light and Life* to send the names of those you wish us to pray for. *Requiescant in pace!*

