Vatican Council II has occupied a significant place of importance in my personal life. In 1960, after completing my doctorate on an ecumenical topic, which was later published as a book, I found myself appointed by Pope John XXIII as an official theologian of Vatican Council II and assigned by him to the Secretariat for Christian Unity, which was chaired by Cardinal Augustin Bea (1881-1968). I was very grateful for this totally unexpected honour. Working at the Council was an extraordinary experience for me, affecting my entire life as a professional theologian. The Secretariat for Christian Unity had been assigned responsibility for three draft documents: 1) on ecumenism, 2) on religious liberty, and 3) on the Church’s relation to Judaism and the World Religions. These were controversial topics.

In this article I wish to show that the Church at Vatican II adopted a critical openness to modern society, heeding the call of the Gospel to include in its mission the promotion of peace and justice in the world. I shall argue that what emerged at the Council was a new self-understanding of the Catholic Church.

The Church’s relation to modernity

At the end of the 18th century, in the wake of the French Revolution, and then again throughout the 19th century, the papacy rejected the emergence of liberal society. In particular, it repudiated republicanism, popular sovereignty, separation of Church and State or laïcité, human rights, and religious liberty. The Church understood itself politically and socially in terms of the feudal-aristocratic order established in the Middle Ages. In his encyclical Mirari vos of 1832, Gregory XVI urged Catholics to remain faithful to their princes and to resist the liberal social revolution. Even the bold steps taken at the end of the 19th century by the great Leo XIII to denounce the economic injustices produced by industrial capitalism and to advocate humans rights, religious pluralism, and democratic government, did not venture so far as to embrace the idea of the separation of Church and State. The resistance to this idea embarrassed Catholics living as minorities in countries that were Protestant or secular. Catholic theologians, who suggested a more positive approach to modern society, found themselves censured by ecclesiastical authorities. Let me mention just two cases: both the American Jesuit John Courtney Murray, who offered Catholic arguments in favour of religious liberty and democracy, and the French Dominican Yves Congar, who advocated Catholic participation in the ecumenical movement, were censured.

Pope John XXIII convoked Vatican Council II for the aggiornamento of the Catholic Church (bringing it up to date), which meant rethinking its relation to modern society and discovering what fidelity to the Gospel meant for Catholics living in this new historical situation. Many bishops took up this task with enthusiasm. Several theologians, who had been censured in the preceding years, were now invited to join the bishops in this important work. The proposals made for the Church’s renewal led to many theological debates at the Council. Unsurprisingly, the topics assigned to the Secretariat of Christian Unity – religious liberty, ecumenism, and interreligious dia-
The Modern World

Dialogue – resulted in deep disagreements among the bishops. Some of them felt that the Council simply did not have the authority to change any papal teachings which were over a century old. Thanks to the encouragement of John XXIII, and after him, Paul VI, the bishops eventually accepted the new teachings almost unanimously.

An emerging new consciousness

Following my service at the Second Vatican Council, when I was a professor at the University of St. Michael’s College in Toronto, I decided to take a two-year leave of absence to study sociology at the New School for Social Research in New York City. One reason for my interest in sociology was the wish to gain a better understanding of how the Church’s self-understanding seemed to be evolving. Studying the 19th and 20th century social thinkers – essentially the founders of sociology – I discovered very quickly that the Church’s longstanding opposition to modernity was not simply a reluctance to detach itself from the old European aristocratic order. What was changing with the arrival of modernity was much deeper than the reconstruction of society; what changed was people’s self-understanding. People experienced themselves more and more as citizens responsible for their society.

Perhaps the earliest analysis of this new self-understanding and the related emergence of liberal society was Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America published in the 1830s.[1] In this essay, de Tocqueville contrasted the ideas and values of people in the United States with the ideas and values of people in French society, which was still largely traditional in its social and political make-up. Another celebrated study was Community and Society [2] by Ferdinand Toennies, published in Germany in 1887. Toennies’ analysis of the change in people’s self-understanding was so convincing that contemporary sociological studies contrasting traditional and modern societies still use the German words Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, taken from the book’s original title. To gain a better understanding of the achievement of Vatican Council II, I wish to offer a brief summary, inevitably simplified, of how the classical sociologists saw the impact of modernity on human self-understanding.

Traditional society – called Gemeinschaft – was embraced by its members in the same taken-for-granted manner in which they embraced their family. In that context, people were aware of their social bond, including their inherited religion and their common values, far more than they were of their own individuality. They accepted the established social order, the importance of divine providence within that order; they accepted the station into which they were born, whether high or low. They accepted that society was ruled by princes blessed by the Church who demanded obedience in God’s name. People here internalized their society: its ethical norms constituted their personal conscience.

According to Toennies, modern society or Gesellschaft developed in the wake of the republican and industrial revolutions. Many people now recognized that society was not a given, shaped by divine providence, but the invention of human beings capable of reconstructing it for the future. The analogue of modern society was no longer the family; the analogue now was the club or the free association set up by individuals to achieve a common purpose. People were here beginning to become conscious of their individual identity and their personal freedom. The bond that now united them was the contract on the basis of which their association had been constituted. People in traditional society, Toennies argued, had a powerful ethical conscience formed by their communal existence, while people in modern society acquired a new consciousness, an awareness of their autonomy and a love of personal freedom. This autonomy was a highly ambiguous mental state: it could foster a new kind of egotism, eager self-promotion and aggressive rivalry, yet it could also produce a new social consciousness, making people aware of their responsibility for the world to which they belonged.

Let me make two remarks to clarify this comparison between the two societies. First, Toennies does not offer the images of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft as descriptions of concrete historical societies; the two images are for him rather models constructed to guide sociological research inquiring to what extent particular societies have been transformed by the conditions of modernity. Second, Toennies and the classical sociologists do not look upon the entry into modernity as unqualified progress; they are keenly aware of the dark side of modernity, its potential for generating individualism, utilitarianism, secularism and the decline of humanistic values. Yet they also recognize the positive side of modernity: the emerging awareness of men and women who recognize and accept collective responsibility for their world. This is a truth about human beings not known in the past, not even by the sages.

The aggiornamento at Vatican II

The Council Fathers recognized the new self-understanding of men and women and explored what the Gospel of Jesus Christ meant to them as agents responsible for their world. The Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et spes (1965) dealt with both of these issues at great length. The changed self-understanding of men and women was presented at the beginning of this document, especially in sections 4 – 10. Later, in the chapter on the development of culture, a single paragraph (§ 55) summarized the emerging historical consciousness:
From day to day, in every group or nation, there is an increase in the number of men and women who are conscious that they themselves are the authors and the artisans of the culture of their community. Throughout the whole world there is a mounting increase in the sense of autonomy as well as of responsibility. This is of paramount importance for the spiritual and moral maturity of the human race. This becomes clearer if we consider the unification of the world and the duty which is imposed upon us, that we build a better world based upon truth and justice. Thus we are witnesses of the birth of a new humanism, one in which man is defined first of all by this responsibility to his brothers and to history.

Paragraph 55 is in itself remarkable for two reasons. First, it reflects the cultural optimism of the 1960s that expected the positive dimension of modernity to be acknowledged worldwide and enable the human family to constitute a global society of justice and peace. This optimism was unfounded. Since then we have come to recognize that it is the sinister dimension of modernity that is affecting human history, producing a competitive world of winners and losers and an ever more unjust distribution of wealth and power.

Second, since the definition of the new humanism makes no reference to God, an inattentive reader may conclude that this humanism is a secular project or even a Prometheus effort aimed at self-redemption. Taking into account the earlier sections of Gaudium et spes, it is quite clear that it sees this new humanism as sustained by God. Assuming moral responsibility for the well-being of others and society as a whole is a spiritual conversion away from selfishness or indifference and hence the work of divine grace. According to Gaudium et spes, God is the ground, the vector, and the horizon of human self-making. Participation in Christ’s redemptive work, rescuing humanity from sin, is a gift offered to every person. Gaudium et spes says this very clearly: “Since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.” (§ 22)

To express the new self-understanding of men and women, Pope John Paul II introduced a new vocabulary. He referred to humans as “subjects”; i.e., free agents responsible for the conditions of their own lives. Governments are unjust if they deprive citizens of their “subjectivity,” that is to say, if they do not allow them to express themselves, if they prevent their voices from being heard, and if they exclude them from the decision-making process. To deprive people of their subjectivity, in this sense, is to act against their very dignity as human beings.[3] Even if the government should adopt a policy that serves the common good, it fails to live up to the requirement of justice if it has not consulted civil society. Pope John Paul II also insisted on the subjectivity of workers. Workers, he wrote, must not be seen or treated as the objects of production, to be controlled by the owners or managers of the industries, but as the subjects of production, co-responsible for the organization of their labour.[4] John Paul II’s emphasis on the subjectivity of men and women also raises the question of whether Catholics are subjects in the Church, entitled to be heard and consulted by the authorities.

Rethinking the relation between the orders of creation and redemption

When the Council Fathers at Vatican II listened to the proclamation of the Gospel in the context of the culture created by the new human self-understanding, they heard a new summons, which led them to a better understanding of the complex relation between issues that belonged to the world and those that fell to the Church.

Prior to Vatican II, theologians used to make a clear distinction between the natural order, based on reason and natural law, and the supernatural order, produced by the redemptive gifts of faith, hope and charity. Catholic social teaching and the promotion of peace and social justice belonged to the natural order. The social encyclical of the popes provided rational arguments for the just ordering of society: they did not refer to Jesus Christ because their social messages were addressed to people of good will, including non-believers. We thought, at that time, that the encounter with Jesus and the gifts of faith, hope and love lifted believers to a higher level, the supernatural order, enabling them to worship God, lead of life of prayer, strive for sanctity, and look forward to eternal life. Social justice and peacemaking were here recognized as urgent tasks, yet they were sustained by the natural virtues; they did not belong to the supernatural order of charity. This is the reason why the literature housed in the libraries of seminaries, convents, and monasteries avoided topics such as war, oppression, colonialism, exploitation and racism: these were issues that belonged to the world, extrinsic to the spiritual life.

The separation between the natural and supernatural orders was rethought by Pope John XIII’s encyclical Pacem in terris and the teaching of Vatican II, both of which recognized the ongoing interaction between the two orders of creation and redemption. Pope John took the innovative step of founding Catholic social teaching on the Scriptures as well as on rational reflection. Rethinking the Church’s rejection of human rights and religious liberty, he turned anew to the Scriptures and came to recognize the high dignity of the human person. He referred specifically to the creation of humans in the image of God and the friendship Jesus offers to every human being.[5]
This high dignity, Pope John XIII argued, is the theological foundation of human rights and civil liberties that governments and all citizens must respect.

God’s Word in the Scriptures summoned the Church and its members to become socially engaged, to promote social justice, human rights and solidarity, to bring relief to the poor and justice to the oppressed. Paul VI and John Paul II followed this innovative turn. In his Centesimus annus John Paul II writes, in the past “a twofold approach prevailed: one directed to this world and this life, to which faith ought to remain extraneous; the other directed towards a purely other-worldly salvation, which neither enlightens nor directs existence on earth.”[6] John Paul II credited Leo XIII with this change in tone, initiating an approach that would be fully endorsed by papal social teaching much later. He writes, “In effect, to teach and spread Catholic social doctrine pertains to the Church's evangelizing mission and is an essential part of the Christian message, since this teaching points out the direct consequences of that message in the life of society and situates daily work and struggles for justice in the context of bearing witness to Christ the Saviour.”[7] The Church’s social teaching is itself a valid instrument of evangelization: it proclaims God and the mystery of salvation in Christ to every human being, and for that reason reveals man to himself.[8]

The message of Jesus Christ also calls believers to become socially engaged in promoting justice, peace, and solidarity. In the past, believers faithful to the Gospel committed themselves to a personal ethic; now, enlightened by Pacem in terris and Vatican II, they also commit themselves to a social ethics. What has emerged in the life of the Church is a new ideal of holiness, one that includes concern for the oppressed, impoverished or otherwise marginalized members of our societies. A growing number of Catholics today are discovering the political dimension of charity.

This happened in a dramatic way in Latin America. The Latin American Bishops Conference, meeting at Medellin in 1968, decided that the Church’s pastoral ministry among the poor included “the consciousness-raising” of parishioners, making them aware of the forces and structures responsible for their misery and encouraging them to become socially engaged in improving the conditions of their lives.[9] Medellin’s pastoral policy led to an extraordinary flowering of Latin American “liberation theology.”

In North America the new teaching also affected the self-understanding and the lives of many Catholics, especially men and women belonging to religious orders and congregations: they became socially concerned and gave public witness in support of justice and peace. Since I have been associated for over twenty years with the Jesuit-sponsored Centre justice et foi of Montreal, I am well aware that the Society of Jesus redefined its identity and mission at its 32nd General Congregation in 1975 by committing itself to the service of the faith and the promotion of justice. The religious congregations in Quebec, especially the women religious, have become socially engaged, supporting le mouvement communautaire and giving public witness of their commitment to faith and justice. The recent conflict between the American Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) and the Vatican was made possible to a large extent by the changed self-understanding of the religious congregations and their support of public policies, sometimes at odds with the ethical teaching of the bishops.

Two Popes, Benedict and Francis

Pope Benedict XVI Pope was uneasy with the Church’s turn to the world. He worried that passionate concern for social justice, which expressed itself politically, would cloud the role and importance of worship, prayer and the spiritual life. In some of his writings, he reintroduced the distinction between the natural and the supernatural orders and assigned the Church’s mission to the latter. In his first encyclical Deus caritas est (2005), he recognized the practice of charity or diakonia as an essential dimension of the Church’s mission, yet he restricted this mission to the service offered to people in need. Practicing charity, he writes, “is not a means of changing the world ideologically nor a service of worldly stratagems, but a way of making present […] the love which humans always need.”[10] He emphasized this again at the end of his pontificate in the motu proprio De caritate ministranda, a legislative document that introduced greater ecclesiastical control of Catholic organizations engaged in countries of the Third World, like the Canadian Catholic Organization of Development and Peace, in order to ensure that the services they offer to the poor remain non-political and do not challenge the established order. There was to be no consciousness-raising. Added to this was his unrelenting criticism of liberation theology, which he began as Cardinal of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith and continued after he was elevated to the papacy.[11]

With the election of Pope Francis, a Latin American, on March 13, 2013, the tone of the Vatican suggests greater openness to the concerns driving Latin American liberation theology, particularly the need to attend local churches to the needs of the poor in our world. Pope Francis has spoken of the need to become a Church of service; one that helps and acts in solidarity with the poor. Pope Francis has seemed willing to re-examine Latin American liberation theology and the importance of “consciousness-raising.” Within in a single week in early September 2013, the Vatican newspaper L’Osservatore Romano published an interview with the founder of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez, an article by Gutierrez himself, and two articles praising his work – one of them by Archbishop
Müller, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.[12] Since then Gustavo Gutierrez has been invited to a private conversation with Pope Francis.

Pope Francis has reemphasized the Church’s critical openness to the world introduced by Vatican II. He promotes what he calls “a culture of encounter,”[13] based on the confidence that everyone has something to teach us and hence deserves to be heard. This culture fosters dialogue and cooperation in today’s pluralistic world where people who disagree about religious and ethical issues must learn to work together in the service of the common good, a process sustained by the Holy Spirit. According to the Pope’s remarkable speeches on his visits to Lampedusa (July 8, 2013) and Cagliari (Sept. 22, 2013), this cooperation in today’s world is mainly directed to joint resistance to the capitalist empire and the quest for alternative economic and political policies. For Pope Francis, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ has world-transforming implications. A careful reading of his long public interviews suggests that the present Pope embraces and is likely to develop further the Church’s new self-understanding that emerged at Vatican II.[14]

Archbishop Oscar Romero, assassinated in San Salvador because he preached solidarity with the poor and denounced the murderous violence practiced by the army, was respected by John Paul II and Benedict XVI as a political figure, not as martyr who died for his faith. Pope Francis regards his as a witness of the Church’s faith as defined by Vatican Council II and the Medellin Conference and has announced his beatification in May 2015. ■

ENDNOTES
[14] The interview with Antonio Spodaro, S.J., editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica* and with the Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari were published worldwide at the end of September 2013.

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