Vatican II and Its Legacy

PART II: LOOKING BACK AT 50 YEARS

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Editor’s Welcome

I am pleased to present readers of The Newman Rambler with the second of our two volumes dedicated to commemorating the Second Vatican Council. The timing of this issue with the closing of the Council in 1965 is not likely to be the last time the Newman Rambler will visit the topic of the conciliar legacy, but it is a special and concerted attempt on our part to mark with the Church a truly remarkable historical event in her history.

Several factors contributed to the variety and richness of perspectives represented in this volume: the diversity of the authors’ cultural and scholarly backgrounds, the breadth of interest and expertise they bring to a range of questions related to Vatican II, and the varying degrees of their proximity to the Council itself, from actual participation in Vatican II to growing-up in the post-conciliar era with no experience of the Church before Vatican II.

Each of the articles in this volume displays true concern for the well-being of the Church. As each author works to bring different facets of the Council to light, each also tackles different questions or worries regarding belief and practice in the Catholic Church in the post-conciliar era.

If fifty years in the life of the Church is not a very long time, it is certainly not long enough to afford us the best vantage point from which to evaluate the legacy of Vatican II. The repeated suggestion in these essays is that any such evaluation must be accompanied by earnest efforts to rediscover or discover (as the case may be) the conciliar texts, reflecting on their meaning, purpose, and trajectory with diligence and seriousness of purpose.

As this volume was going to print, Pope Francis announced the extraordinary Jubilee dedicated to Divine Mercy, giving a timeliness to this volume and to our forthcoming issue on ‘dying with dignity’ and ‘the future of the family’ that we could scarcely have imagined. As with all issues of The Newman Rambler, it is our hope that you would find this volume and its successors fruitful and engaging both in its print and online formats: www.newmancentre.org. Thanks for your continued interest and support!

Sincerely,

Robert Di Pede
Editor-in-Chief
John Henry Newman as a ‘Father’ of Vatican II

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Introduction: Fathers and Doctors

The answer to the question, which has been mooted since the close of Vatican II, of whether John Henry Newman can, in any meaningful sense, be described as a ‘Father’ of the Council, depends very much on what one understands by the appellation, ‘Father.’

In its first and simplest sense, the word ‘Father’ is applied to those bishops who participated in the council. Hence, Pope Benedict XVI, during a meeting with the parish priests and the clergy of Rome in 2013, contrasted the ‘Council of the Fathers’ (the council understood as an exercise in ‘faith seeking understanding’) with the ‘Council of the Media’ (the council understood in terms of a “political hermeneutic,” namely as “a power struggle between different trends in the Church”).[1] This basic understanding of ‘Council Father’, i.e., as a ‘participant’ in – and, therefore, in some sense, a shaper of – the event, would seem to be at work when Newman is described as, for example, the “absent Council father” or the “invisible peritus” of Vatican II, and reflects the conviction that what the Council actually proposed dovetails (to a greater or lesser extent) with what Newman’s thought was.

Those who advocate such a view of Newman are obliged to acknowledge that there is no direct reference to Newman in any of the conciliar documents, though Ian Ker has recently argued that a “more or less direct reference” to Newman’s theory of development of doctrine may be found in Dei Verbum, §8.[2] Ker has convincingly argued that a good case can be made for the view that Newman’s reflections on a number of themes “offer a balanced, corrective commentary on events during and after the tumultuous years of the Council.”[3]

Ker’s analysis establishes Newman as an important ‘commentator’ on the council, but more would seem to be needed for him to qualify as a ‘Father of Vatican II.’ The key in this regard might be found by returning to the more classical use of the term, Father, when applied to prominent Christian thinkers. In the technical parlance of Christian tradition, ‘Father’ is an “honorary title” which bears the traces of its complex origins in “a host of common, human, Old Testament, and Graeco-Roman conceptions, such as (a) the father as progenitor of life and as head of the family, for whose welfare and authoritative leadership he was responsible; and as (b) the guardian and mediator of experience and tradition and thus as the authentic teacher, particularly of the faith.”[4]

The ecclesiastical use of the term builds upon the “natural concept” of paternity, since those accorded the title are regarded as the “fathers of the believers, since in the act of baptism they are the progenitors of the new life, in the proclamation and interpretation of the faith they are their educators and teachers, and as leaders of the community they are the authorities and providers of the ‘family’.” While the term, until the fourth century, was applied only to bishops it was later applied to priests and deacons. A ‘Church Father’ is an “authentic tradent and guarantor of the true faith,” “a reliable teacher …to whom one may appeal when in doubt.”[5]

Generally speaking, the appellation ‘Church Father’ is restricted to those who, in addition to their doctrinal orthodoxy, their proven holiness of life, and their (at least implicit) recognition by the Church, lived in antiquity, i.e., “the period of the ancient church.”[6] There is, however, a common ten-
dency to conflate the notion of ‘Church Father’ with the notion of ‘doctor’ of the church. The doctors of the church include such ‘recent’ additions as, for example, Alphonsus de Liguori (1696-1781), who was declared a doctor of the Church in 1871, Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) who was declared a doctor of the Church in 1997, and Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) who was declared a doctor of the Church in 2012.

Bernard McGinn has written that “[w]hat is distinctive about the doctors as a group is the model they present of combining the intense love of God and neighbor that defines sanctity with a commitment to the intellectual work of learning, preaching, teaching, and writing.” Their significance, then, is not confined to their reputation for holiness, but is to be sought “especially in their writings. Doctors exist to be read and studied.”[7] In a somewhat more nuanced fashion, Cardinal Ratzinger, speaking in 1990, declared that “the characteristic of the great Doctor of the Church … is that he teaches not only through his thought and speech but also by his life, because within him, thought and life are interpenetrated and defined. If this is so,” he went on to say, “then Newman belongs to the great teachers of the Church, because he both touches our hearts and enlightens our thinking.”[8]

Newman as a ‘Father’ of Vatican II

It is interesting that McGinn proposes Newman as a candidate for the title, ‘doctor of the Church’, in view of his “contributions to Christian teaching.” He argues that these are “remarkable, reminding us of some of the great patristic doctors whom he studied and loved so well.” McGinn points out that, since Newman’s theology “was formed more in dialogue with patristic than with scholastic thinkers,” his “life and thought link the first doctors of the church with the issues of the modern age.” For McGinn, this means that “Newman witnesses to the doctoral charism as no other figure of recent centuries.”[9]

Since the ‘doctors (and potential doctors) of the church’ may (mutatis mutandis) reasonably be taken to represent its medieval and modern ‘Fathers,’ Newman might indeed be regarded as a candidate for the latter accolade and one might well appeal to Vatican II as ‘evidence’ of the congruence between his fundamental theological insights and the Church’s formal teaching. In this view of things, the description of Newman as a ‘Father of Vatican II’ might well be understood in the sense in which it is applied to those towering figures whose words and deeds are recalled and honored throughout the great Catholic tradition which finds expression in Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Newman’s growing reputation as a seminai Christian thinker and a man of exemplary sanctity (a view confirmed by his beatification in 2010) suggests that he may one day achieve a status akin to those classical Fathers who are remembered for their vigorous advocacy and defense of a particular understanding of the Church’s tradition of faith or their attempts to secure the Church’s place in an environment hostile to its interests. Their status as ‘Fathers’ was a recognition of the fact that they reflect and gave shape to a particular age in the Church’s life. Viewed from this perspective, Newman might in fact qualify as a father of Vatican II, that is to say, as an advocate of some of its most significant claims and as the living embodiment of its response to the age which constituted the Council’s historical context.[10]

Newman and the Spirit of Vatican II

To relate Newman’s thought (and life) to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is no longer unusual. Newman is often lauded for his prescience and portrayed as a harbinger of a more positive attitude towards the laity, a greater appreciation of the historical (and ‘developmental’) character of the tradition of faith, a more experientially-based theology, and so on.[11] Indeed, Newman has even been hailed as a herald of postmodernity, as a defender of what is sometimes called a ‘tradition-specific’ approach to truth, a thinker who was at least aware of the contextual character of every claim to rationality (though he always insisted on the objectivity of truth).[12] Nicholas Lash has remarked that, “If Vatican II can be said, with Paul VI, to have been ‘Newman’s hour’ and if it can therefore be said to have been, in some sense, ‘Newman’s Council,’ this is not because his thought had much influence on the conciliar debates, but rather, we might say, because during the Council the Catholic Church ‘caught up’ with Newman.”[13] There is some truth in this claim, but if the Council did indeed ‘catch up’ with Newman, it could only have been because Newman’s theological inheritance was, at the very least, widely distributed amongst those shaping the Council’s thought. Elsewhere, Lash says something similar when he remarks that “explicit acknowledgement of particular lessons learned [from the study of Newman by theologians] is a poor guide to the impact he has had,” and recalls that, by the 1960’s, “… ‘development’ was the buzzword and was widely seen as Newman’s gift.”[14]

A complete intellectual genealogy of the periti and ‘Fathers’ of Vatican II would, of course, be most revealing in this regard but it is unlikely that it will ever be available. However, a few examples of the intellectual lineage of some major players may prove instructive. Three of the theologians involved in the drafting of Dei Verbum were quite familiar with Newman’s intellectual legacy and his theory of development in particular, at least in part through their personal contacts with leading Newman scholars. Yves Congar had been exposed to Newman’s work through the writings of, among others, Jean Guitton and Louis Bouyer, who was himself a peritus at the
Council. (Bouyer also drew Newman to the attention of Johannes Willebrands, the later Cardinal Archbishop of Utrecht, who, in 1960, was appointed Secretary of the newly established Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and who assisted in the preparation of a number of conciliar documents, including those on ecumenism and religious freedom.)[15] Edward Schillebeeckx was a contemporary of his fellow Dominican and Belgian, Jan Hendrik Walgrave, a leading authority on Newman’s theory of doctrinal development. Karl Rahner had been a student of the great German Newman specialist, Erich Przywara. Already in 1941, Congar was pondering the possibility of applying “to the life of the Church and the possession of faith in fide Ecclesiae” the notions of ‘unconscious’ or implicit knowledge developed by Newman. Congar remarked that, “To our knowledge, only Newman has applied them in this way.”[16]

Speaking in 1990, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, while acknowledging his limited “competence” in the field of Newman studies, declared that three of his mentors, Alfred Läpple, Gottlieb Söhngen (whom Ratzinger described as his “true teacher in theology”), and Heinrich Fries, had provided him with a deep appreciation of Newman’s thought. From Läpple, he learned “Newman’s teaching on conscience [which] became an important foundation for [his] theological personalism,” and which “permeated” his “image of the human being as well as [his] image of the Church.” It also enabled him to understand “the primacy of the Pope.” Söhngen introduced him to Newman’s Grammar of Assent and thereby taught him “the special manner and form of certainty in religious knowledge.” Fries was his entry into “Newman’s teaching on the development of doctrine” which Ratzinger “regard[s], along with his doctrine on conscience, as his decisive contribution to the renewal of theology.” The upshot of all this was Ratzinger’s conviction that Newman “had placed the key in our hand to build historical thought into theology, or much more, he taught us to think historically in theology and so to recognize the identity of faith in all developments.”[17]

Vincent Ferrer Blehl, the first postulator of the cause for Newman’s canonization, spoke of the Council as representing “the assimilation by the Church of many of Newman’s most significant theological and historical insights” and, in this respect, “revealed him to be a prophet.”[18] The affinity between Newman’s thought and the concerns and aspirations of the Council, especially as regards the nature and task of the Church, led Pope John Paul II to describe him as “our true spiritual contemporary.”[19]

It seems fair to say, then, that Newman, at the very least, anticipated the concerns of the council and that his theological presence certainly made itself felt, and may well have permeated the minds and hearts of some of its most significant participants. But one can perhaps go even further and argue that Newman’s major concerns were actually manifest in the very dynamics of the Council. This is the subject of the following reflection.

Newman and the Dynamics of Vatican II

In his 2008 study, What Happened at Vatican II, John W. O’Malley argued that the Council was marked by two great theological turns, a turn to the past in the form of ressourcement (i.e., a return to the sources, especially the patristic sources, of the faith), and a turn to the future in the form of the recognition of the legitimacy of doctrinal development, both of which turns were undertaken with a view to making the Church meaningful to the present age (aggiornamento, “Italian for updating or modernizing”).[20]

As regards the turn to the past, the council, under the influence of figures like Congar and other representatives of the so-called ‘nouvelle théologie’, adopted “a style of discourse more closely resembling the style of the Fathers than the style used by previous councils.” Indeed, O’Malley ventures that, “If we are looking for special characteristics of Vatican II, this has to rank high, maybe even first, among them.”[21]

As regards the turn to the future, the most striking example was undoubtedly the Council’s decree on religious liberty, a decree which was manifestly the fruit of the Church’s encounter with modernity, an encounter which prompted the reappropriation of its centuries-old tradition. O’Malley recalls that John Courtney Murray, the architecht of the decree, had written that “the issue of development of doctrine [was] … the issue underlying all issues at the Council.”[22]

O’Malley agrees with Murray’s assessment but adds two items to the foundational issues shaping the dynamics of the council, namely, “the relationship of [the] center to the rest of the church,” which surfaced especially in the discussions regarding episcopal collegiality, and the question of how authority in the Church should be exercised, which was manifest in the demand for a less “authoritarian and unidirectional style” of “thinking, speaking, and behaving” in favor of “a more reciprocal and responsive model.”[23] We might summarize these three issues as doctrine (and its development), ecclesiology, and authority.

This notion of “three issues-under-the-[many] issues” addressed by the council is, for O’Malley, essential to understanding its “spirit,” which O’Malley defines as “an orientation that goes beyond specific enactments.”[24] In his view, the ‘dynamics’ of the council, so to speak, were shaped by the presence of these three themes, though they themselves were never identified as the council’s leitmotifs. O’Malley acknowled-
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edges that these three issues “are not perfectly distinct from one another” and are only manifest in the discussions and proposals surrounding the attempts to address particular pastoral concerns. Nevertheless, he insists that they “provide lenses for interpreting the council” and even “a first step toward a hermeneutic that transcends an often myopic, sometimes almost proof-texting, approach to the council that focuses on the wording of the documents without regards for contexts, without regard for before and after, and without regard for vocabulary and literary form.”[25]

Clearly, these three issues were at the heart of Newman’s entire theological enterprise. It could hardly be otherwise since, for him, doctrinal development is an ‘event’ involving the entire community of the Church (which, in Newman’s phraseology, needs to be ‘consulted’[26]), and which is formalized by a pronouncement of the Church’s hierarchical authority (ideally, an ecumenical council). While one need not insist on a strict isomorphism between Newman’s major concerns and O’Malley’s ‘issues-under-the-issues,’ it is clear that Newman’s entire theology was shaped by his profound appreciation of the radically historical character of Christian faith, an appreciation that led him to two fundamental insights, namely, that the truth contained in Christianity (what we call revelation) can only be discerned in and through engagement with history, and that this truth has its own history, a history which is inextricably bound up with the life and fortunes of the Church in its entirety.

Newman and the Dynamics of the Postconciliar Church

What is particularly intriguing, from a Newmanian perspective, is O’Malley’s claim that, “by their very nature,” the three ‘issues-under-the-issues’ at the Council (i.e., doctrine, ecclesiology, and authority) “do not admit of definitive resolution one way or the other.” As he puts it:

Their essence is to be in tension. Each of them pulls in opposite directions. Both directions have validity; neither is absolute. The church, like any organization, must deal with the tension, not deny it. If the institution is to be healthy and effective in carrying out its missions, it must maintain and exploit the dialectic between continuity and change, between center and periphery, between firmness and flexibility.[27]

These remarks are reminiscent of Newman’s reflections on the interaction among the three ‘offices’ which constitute the Church’s essential structure and determine her mission. Christ had united in himself three offices or missions, namely, those of priest, prophet and king.[28] Christ is priest because he mediates between the faithful and the Father. He is prophet because he proclaims the truth. He is king because he has authority over his followers.

In the Church these offices are divided among the members of the community. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that they are concentrated in particular ‘centers of action’[29] (Newman’s terminology) within the Church. The priestly office takes shape in the visible ecclesial community (the parish) under the leadership of the pastor. The teaching office takes shape in the Church’s theological life, that is to say, in the efforts of theologians and the Magisterium to articulate the content of the faith through the formulation of doctrine. The kingly office takes shape in the episcopal ordering of the Church, under the authority of the Pope in collaboration with the world episcopate.

[30] Newman insists that these three offices flow from, and serve, a more fundamental, organic unity. And he is also in- sistent that they should not be regarded in hierarchical terms. Indeed, it has been said that Newman’s vision is less hierarchical than that of Vatican II. The Council recognizes that lay people possess these three offices in virtue of their baptism and confirmation,[31] but regards ordination, especially episcopal ordination, as involving a more profound participation in them. [32] With the exception of the episcopal office, “Newman seems to make the distribution of the offices depend largely on the temperament and training of individuals.”[33] And one must not forget that Newman saw the kingly office primarily in functional terms. It serves mainly to order the Church’s life, not its doctrine. What is especially striking is that Newman situates the priestly office mainly at the level of popular religion, the priest and his flock in their parishes. And he locates the teaching office in the broad circle of theology. Of course, Newman recognized the authority of the Magisterium to pronounce on matters of faith. But he also insisted that this faith must be manifest in the life of the community as a whole (sensus fidelium).

What is most striking about Newman’s analysis, however, is his description of the relationship which obtains among the three offices. As Newman sees it, this relationship is inevitably characterised by tension and even competition. Indeed, Newman recognized that the three offices could clash with one another. He saw two reasons for this: (1) the fact that each office has a distinctive objective; and, (2) the fact that each office employs different means to realize that objective. As Newman explains it:

Truth is the guiding principle of theology and theological inquiries; devotion and edification, of worship; and of government, expedience. The instrument of theology is reasoning; of worship, our emotional nature; of rule, command and coercion .... Each of the three has its separate scope and direction; each has its own interests to promote and further; each has to find room for the claims
of the other two; and each will find its own line of action influenced and modified by the others, nay, sometimes, in a particular case the necessity of the others converted into a rule of duty for itself.[34]

In other words, each office must seek to realize its own interests while, at the same time, making room for the interests of the two others. To make matters even more complicated, each office is threatened by a particular danger. Newman makes this point very clearly: “In man as he is, reasoning tends to rationalism; devotion to superstition and enthusiasm; and power to ambition and tyranny.”[35] In other words, those exercising each office can fail in a particular direction. Pastors and all those who are primarily concerned with Christian spirituality run the risk of allowing superstition to take over from a healthy life of prayer and devotion. Theologians, whose main task is critical reflection, run the risk of losing touch with the life of faith, that is to say, with prayer and devotion. Bishops, whose main task is the effective government of the Church, run the risk of becoming preoccupied with power for its own sake.

In this way, the stage is set for all sorts of conflicts: for example, between bishops who insist on order and stability, and theologians who insist on discussion and debate; between pious souls who are convinced that devotion is the most important aspect of Christian life, and theologians - and even bishops - who challenge traditional religious practices; between bishops who expect obedience from their priests, and priests who insist that they are closer to the people and know their real needs; and so on and so forth.

Newman never lost sight of the fact that the three offices exist to serve the one tradition of faith, but his analysis of their interaction does contain three valuable lessons for today’s post-conciliar Church.

The first is that, whatever one’s particular responsibility or place in the Church, one must never lose sight of the whole body.

The second is that those who exercise particular responsibilities in the Church must not be alarmed if, on occasion, the pursuit of one goal seems to predominate. They may – indeed they must – resist excess of whatever kind, but they must also be prepared to recognize that truth is never in their camp alone. Newman, for example, warned theologians of the need to accept the limits of their discipline: “... Theology cannot always have its own way; it is too hard, too intellectual, too exact, to be always equitable, or to be always compassionate; and it sometimes has a conflict or overthrow, or has to consent to a truce or compromise, in consequence of the rival force of religious sentiment or ecclesiastical interests; and that, sometimes in great matters, sometimes in unimportant.”[36]

The third lesson is that those who exercise particular responsibilities in the Church must be prepared to risk conflict if this is the result of an honest determination to fulfill their task.

We might summarize by saying that, from a Newmanian perspective, the life of faith is best served when responsibility is exercised by all, with a view to the well-being of the whole community and all dimensions of its life, in full awareness of the need to give history its due, while trusting always in the Lord of history who has made time his instrument.

It seems fair to say that Vatican II – perhaps somewhat overenthusiastically, but that was, after all, typical of the spirit of the age – endorsed this vision, and that while we can debate whether Newman inspired it or perhaps even shaped it, there is very good reason to believe he would have approved of it.

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ENDNOTES
[7] Bernard McGinn, The Doctors of the Church: Thirty-Three Men and Women who Shaped Christianity (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 175, 176. McGinn’s book predates the inclusion of St. John of Avila (1500-1569) and St. Hildegard of Bingen, both of whom were declared a doctor of the Church in 2012 by Pope Benedict XVI.
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[10] A good case can be made for the claim that Newman’s affinity with us extends to his awareness of, and attempts to come to terms with, the threat to religion posed by what we now describe as secularization. On this theme, see Terrence Merrigan, “The Exile of the Religious Subject: A Newmanian Perspective on Religion in Contemporary Society,” in Staf Hellemans, Peter Jonkers (ed.), A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers, (Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2015), 193-222.

[11] See C.S. Dessain, Newman’s Spiritual Themes (Dublin: Veritas, 1977) 30 who argues that, at Vatican II, “the things Newman fought for were brought forward – freedom, the supremacy of conscience, the Church as a communion, a return to Scripture and the fathers, the rightful place of the laity, work for unity, and all the efforts to meet the needs of the age, and for the Church to take its place in the modern world.”


[23] O’Malley, 9, 11.


[26] Mindful of G.K. Chesterton’s insistence that the entire community includes ‘those who have gone before us in faith’, one might even substitute the word ‘constituency’ for ‘community’ here. See G.K. Chesterton, Heretics/Orthodoxy (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000) 195-196: “But there is one thing that I have never from my youth up been able to understand. I have never been able to understand where people got the idea that democracy was in some way opposed to tradition. It is obvious that tradition is only democracy extended through time. It is trusting to a consensus of common human voices rather than to some isolated or arbitrary record …... Tradition may be defined as an extension of the franchise. Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead.” See John Henry Newman, On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine (London: Sheed & Ward, 1961).

[27] O’Malley, 12.


[30] In 1877 Newman spoke only of “the Papacy and its Curia” (Via Media, 25) in regard to the kingly office. Avery Dulles points to the limitations of this approach, but writes that, “This surely was not Newman’s full thought on the matter.” Dulles locates the cause of Newman’s interest in the papacy in his concern to make amends for his Anglican hostility to the Pope. See Avery Dulles, “The Threefold Office in Newman’s Ecclesiology,” in Newman After a Hundred Years, I.T. Ker, A.G. Hill (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 391-392. Newman observes that the pope “inherits these (three) offices and acts for the church in them (...) he is not himself the Body of Christ, but the chief part of the Body” (Via Media, 25).

[31] Lumen gentium, §31, §34-36; Apostolicam actuositatem, §2, §10.

[32] Lumen gentium, §21, §25-27; Christus Dominus, §11, §12-16; Presbyterorum ordinis, §1, §4-6; O Maltae totius, 4.


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 human 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-
logue – 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 terms of 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 analogy of modern society was no longer the family; the analogy 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 Promethean making process. To deprive people of their subjectivity would be to act against their very dignity as human beings.

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 Promethean effort aimed at self-making. 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. 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. 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 encyclicals 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.
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 very 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 Medellín 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] Medellín’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 rede-
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 every person 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.

Gregory Baum was Professor of Religious Studies at McGill University until 1995, when he was appointed Professor Emeritus of the Faculty of Religious Studies. Prior to his career at McGill University, he taught theology for 27 years at the University of Toronto (St. Michael’s College). During the Second Vatican Council he served as a theologian on the Secretariat of Christian Unity. In addition to holding degrees in Mathematics and a doctorate in Theology from the University of Freiburg, Professor Baum completed graduate studies in Sociology at the New School for Social Research in New York City. He is the author of more than 20 books, including TRUTH AND RELEVANCE: CATHOLIC THEOLOGY IN FRENCH QUEBEC SINCE THE QUIET REVOLUTION (2014) and FERNAND DUMONT: A SOCIOLOGIST TURNS TO THEOLOGY (2015), both published by McGill Queen’s University Press.
LEAD, Kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home --
Lead Thou me on!
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene, -- one step enough for me.

I was not ever thus, nor pray'd that Thou
Shouldst lead me on.
I loved to choose and see my path; but now
Lead Thou me on!
I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,
Pride ruled my will; remember not past years.

So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still
Will lead me on,
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till
The night is gone;
And with the morn those angel faces smile
Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.

At Sea, 16 June 1833

John Henry Cardinal Newman
On the desk in front of me are three artifacts from the modern world: a suicide note, a letter, and a book. Allow me to introduce each one:

The suicide note is from 2007. It reads as follows: “I’m so sorry for what I’ve put you through. …I just can’t be a burden to you and my friends any longer. You are all better off without me. …I’ve just snapped. I can’t take this meaningless existence anymore. I’ve been a constant disappointment and that trend would have only continued. …I love you mommy. I love you dad. …P.S. I’m really sorry.”[1] Nineteen-year-old Robert Hawkins then went to the Westroads Mall in Omaha, Nebraska, with a rifle. He shot eight people before killing himself.

The letter I am holding is from 1881. It was written by Charles Darwin to William Graham, author of Creed of Science. In the letter, Darwin wrote: “with me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man’s mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one [sic] trust in the convictions of a monkey’s mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?”[2]

The book is from 2006. It was written by Barack Obama and is entitled The Audacity of Hope. In this book, President Obama contrasts politics, which is based on compromise, with religion, which does not allow for compromise. He writes: “To base one’s life on such uncompromising [religious] commitments may be sublime; to base our policy making on such commitments would be a dangerous thing.”[3]

Each of these artifacts illustrates one of three powerful tendencies of our modern age: nihilism, scientism, and statism. Nihilism involves the experience of meaninglessness; as in the case of Hawkins, it can lead to violence and self-destruction. Scientism attempts to replace religion by seeking to explain all of reality in terms of scientific methods alone. Scientism is driven by the hope that man can choose his own purposes and meanings;[4] and since it is based on a view of man as purely animal, it eventually undermines its own devotion to reason, a matter concerning which Darwin himself expressed doubt in this very letter. The third tendency of the modern world is “statism.” While Obama’s view of politics, which he sees as necessitating compromise, may be sound on many questions of governance, statism is a danger implicit in Obama’s separation of “uncompromising commitments” from politics. “Statism” is a word from political science referring to high levels of state involvement in the economy and society; I mean here to use the word not so much in this way as in an older sense of the word: “subservience to political expediency in religious matters” (Oxford English Dictionary, sense 2). While Obama rec-
The Second Vatican Council gave us the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes). This document tilled the soil for the New Evangelization, equipping us with tools for the inevitable confrontation with nihilism, scientism, and statism. These tools, I argue, are three: (1) a new sense of confidence and a willingness to dialogue with the modern world, (2) a deep understanding of what it is to be human, and (3) a ‘cultural logic’ that helps us discern wisely between different courses of decision and action.

The first part of my argument concerns the style and attitude of Gaudium et spes. George Weigel writes in Witness to Hope that Archbishop Karol Wojtyła’s work on Gaudium et spes was his primary contribution to the Second Vatican Council.[5] Wojtyła thought it important to adopt an “ecumenical style” rather than a defensive style so as to signal openness to dialogue with the modern world.[6] Thus, the document addresses itself to the “whole of humanity.”[7] It proclaims that nothing “genuinely human fails to raise an echo” in Christian hearts.[8] The task of the Church is to scrutinize the “signs of the times” and to respond to the “perennial questions which men ask about this life and the life to come” using a language suited to each generation.[9] The document speaks of the Church not as opposed to the modern world but as being in the modern world. Christians share the hopes and sufferings of everyone.

The ecumenical style of the document was indeed new. It modeled an approach for Catholics that remains important today. In the first part of the nineteenth century, the Church was far less open on this front, having suffered severe attacks on its intellectual integrity and on its political freedom during the Enlightenment, amidst the French Revolution, and under Napoleon (who, I might add, had kidnapped two popes). In response to such injustices, nineteenth-century Church documents tended to be quite severe in their condemnation of the modern world. For example, in 1864 Pius IX’s Syllabus of Errors (paragraph 80) proclaimed that it was an error to think that, “The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization.”[10] Even in the age of the famed Syllabus and all the stringency it legislated, there were others, such as John Henry Newman (1801-1890), who worked to bridge the modern world to Catholicism through dialogue. They did this by digging deep into Catholic tradition for intellectual resources that would enrich conversations ranging from freedom to the unity of Christian churches. Nevertheless, without the work of yet another two or three generations of Catholic theologians, the reality of Gaudium et spes would not have been possible.

By the 1960s, following the devastation of the Second World War and then the onset of the nuclear arms race, humanity was left to come to terms with its own “absolute contempt for man,” in Wojtyła’s words.[11] Wojtyla had witnessed man’s self-contempt in Nazism and Communism; neither was it absent from the liberal regimes of the West. The emphasis on the human person, which was a core concern of Gaudium et spes, also occupied a pivotal place in the pontificate of John Paul II. Here I am touching on the second part of my argument: that Gaudium et spes furthered the Church’s dialogue with the modern world precisely by talking about something that we are all concerned about, regardless of any stance on religion; namely, the importance of articulating what it is to be human. While many thought (and still argue) that religion is a barrier to understanding the human person, Gaudium et spes claims just the opposite. The closer human beings come to God the closer they come to their own humanity and the truths of the world. This is the kind of truth that can be tested and verified in our own experience of the life of faith.[12] As Gaudium et spes puts it, “Christ…fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”[13] On this theological foundation, the Second Vatican Council prepared the way for the New Evangelization, enriching the potential of our language and what it can express about our humanity.

The 2007 killings and suicide – to say nothing of the drive to legalize physician-assisted suicide – remind us of the urgency to address the meaning of human life. They also indicate the inability of men and women to devise such meaning through their own devices. Tragically, Hawkins found in his “meaningless existence” the only meaning left to him, it seemed: the fame that would result from his shooting spree. He resorted to the violence so often associated with man-made idols. But those idols can never answer the deepest questions of the meaning and purpose of human existence. Gaudium et spes says that man “plunges into the depths of reality whenever he enters into his own heart; God, Who probes the heart, awaits him there; there he discerns his proper destiny beneath the eyes of God.”[14] In man’s heart, the document reads, the most basic questions arise: “what is man? What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death, which continues to exist despite so much progress? …What follows this earthly life?”[15] In this way, Gaudium et spes summons Catholics to speak with modern people about fundamental questions of common concern: Why would God allow suffering and evil? What is human happiness and the meaning of life? From whom should we seek wisdom and in what does it consist? Are there as many truths as there are people, or is there a truth that beckons us all? These are the
questions of human life, in which the human being is a meaning-seeking animal unlike any other. These are the basic questions that should be the foundation of Catholic education and evangelization. By growing with others in the answers to these questions the light of Christ can enter the modern soul and the modern mind.

The third part of my argument concerns how Gaudium et spes prepares Catholics to engage culture. Culture is like a dinner table where the Church and the world can dialogue. What I call a ‘cultural logic’ is the manner in which – I would suggest – Catholics can speak at that dinner table with the world. Gaudium et spes includes an entire section on the importance that culture bears on the full development of the human person. It defines culture socio-historically as a people’s common way of life, such that one can speak of a ‘plurality of cultures’ in the world; it also defines culture in a humanistic and universal sense as everything by which people strive to improve themselves physically and spiritually.[16] “The Gospel of Christ constantly renews the life and culture of fallen man,” the document reads. The Church, “in the very fulfillment of her own function, stimulates and advances human and civic culture; by her action, also by her liturgy, she leads men toward interior liberty.”[17]

This focus on culture is a new departure for the Church’s engagement with the modern world. The socio-historic meaning of the word is the greatest contribution of anthropology to modern thought, but culture in this sense only came to prominence in the early twentieth century. Scholars such as Christopher Dawson and T. S. Eliot helped make it common parlance among English-speaking Christians during the 1930s to the 1950s. It was adopted by the Council to describe the ways of life of the modern world into which the Church sought to bring Christ. Ever since, the concept of culture has greatly shaped that evangelical mission. For example, the roots of the Pontifical Council for Culture date back to the Council.[18] The New Evangelization is geared toward evangelizing culture,[19] and the phrases “culture of death” and “culture of life” are routinely used by Catholics in thinking about the modern world. The term “culture” is central to post-Vatican II Catholicism thanks partly to Gaudium et spes.

The cultural logic implicit in Gaudium et spes is a way of thinking that springs from attention to the history of culture, Christian and pagan, as an object of knowledge. A cultural logic helps Catholics engage the modern world in three major ways. (1) It orients us toward the field of action. It is in the sphere of culture (domestic cultures, institutional cultures, entertainment cultures, civic cultures) that Catholics must witness Christ. The notion that such communities play a central role in ennobling the human person “is an extremely important contribution of Gaudium et spes both to the Catholic Church and to the whole world.”[20]

(2) Secondly, a cultural logic makes us aware of cultures, of cultural duality between Catholicism and the world. The tension in this duality shifts in different ages of the Church and is often fruitful. For example, the tradition of Christian culture has given the modern world universities, hospitals, great art, the preservation of classical literature, and humanitarian principles that have helped to uplift the downtrodden and end slavery. Catholicism has also gained much from traditions of the non-Christian world, including Greek philosophy, Roman administration and law, polyphony, Latin, use of the Internet, and the idea of “culture” itself.

The cultural duality of which I have been speaking also makes us aware of traditions in modern culture that clash with traditions in Christian culture. For example, liberal secularism is not the “neutral ground” it claims to be but has its own culture and traditions.[21] One of its traditions is to uphold the ideal of individual autonomy. This ideal, especially in the English-speaking world, has contributed to limited government, civil rights, and religious freedom. However, the ideal of individual autonomy can clash with a classical and Catholic view of the human person as social, bodily, and spiritual by nature. These clashes are seen especially in the areas of economic individualism, sex, abortion, euthanasia, conscience protection, and institutional autonomy. By learning to think in terms of culture as the place or dinner table where Church and world dialogue, Catholics can begin to ask questions of the world such as: What are the sources of your liberal tradition of individual autonomy? How have those sources shaped your idea of freedom? Catholics can also ask themselves: How is freedom understood from a Catholic perspective? What traditions of Christian culture in the past can help me spiritually and intellectually confront new developments within modern culture?

Recognizing those areas where there is a clash of traditions (Catholicism and liberalism, for example), injects discernment into our ecumenical dialogue with the modern world. This discernment leads us to recognize which traditions of the modern world can be redeemed and which are so entangled with evil and/or error that dialogue must give way to rigorous opposition. Such discernment takes wisdom, defined as sharing in the light of the divine mind by striving to see the whole picture of reality.[22]

(3) The third benefit of a cultural logic is that it gives Catholics deeper appreciation of the idea of tradition itself. For example, there are different traditions in the interpretation of Vatican II. The interpretation (or hermeneutic) of discontinuity views the Council as a totally new departure for the Church. The Council is seen as essentially an ideological power strug-
gle of traditionalist versus progressive. Cultural logic helps us to realize that the hermeneutic of discontinuity has a cultural history of its own. It can be traced to the Enlightenment, where the cultural legacy of preceding generations was repudiated in the name of “progress.” Pope Benedict XVI wrote that the hermeneutic of discontinuity is incompatible with how Catholics understand tradition. It is the hermeneutic of continuity, according to Pope Benedict, that properly interprets the Second Vatican Council. [23] This hermeneutic views the Council from within the tradition of Christian culture.

The idea of tradition implicit within the hermeneutic of continuity is able to reconcile past and present. It does this in the same way that a new and great piece of art is appreciated within the context of the whole tradition of art that came before it. This is the point T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) makes in his 1919 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” What is new, he writes, is inserted into the existing tradition, which is whole and already complete in itself up to that point in time. Continuity is maintained between old and new because our perspective on the whole of the tradition is altered somewhat in response to the new interpretation or work of art. Thus conformity between old and new is maintained as our view of the whole tradition becomes richer.[24] This is the proper understanding — rather than revolutionary rupture — of the place of the Second Vatican Council within the whole of Catholic tradition.

In these three ways the cultural logic of Gaudium et spes orients Catholics toward the field of action, inculcates wise discernment, and views tradition as essential to creative engagement with modern culture. It now remains to apply the tools of Gaudium et spes of confident dialogue, deep understanding of the human person, and cultural logic to the problems of scientism and statism.

While the capacity for scientific investigation is one of the greatest endowments of mankind, it is limited to answering scientific questions. Lord Jonathan Sacks, a chief rabbi of Britain, points this out in his recent article “The Limits of Secularism.” Science cannot answer the deepest questions of human nature, such as, “Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live?” He writes that science, technology, the liberal democratic state, and the market economy are the four institutions that characterize modernity. While each of them can answer questions within their own ambit of investigation, none of them can answer deeply human questions. Science explains how, Sacks writes, but not why. Technology yields power, but offers no insight as to how we should use it. The modern state protects maximum freedom, but falls silent on its improper uses. The markets offer choices and enable us to increase our potential for wealth, but provide no indication as to what is right and just.[25]

When science tries to answer wisdom questions with scientific answers, it betrays its own requirements of precision and method by venturing into an area for which it is severely ill-equipped. The British evolutionary biologist and president of the Eugenics Society, Julian Huxley (1887-1975), was guilty of this mistake. In his 1964 essay “The New Divinity” (from Essays of a Humanist), he wrote, “There is no separate supernatural realm: all phenomena are part of one natural process of evolution. ... I believe that [a] drastic reorganization of our pattern of religious thought is now becoming necessary, from a god-centered to an evolutionary-centered pattern.” Huxley took up a theological wisdom-based question (does God exist?) and failed to answer it except to deduce a belief about metaphysical reality on the basis of material reality. For all its scientific pretension, Huxley’s answer is rather unsuccessful, for it fails to answer a question based on wisdom by insisting wrongly that it be treated scientifically. By a gradual process, Huxley and his followers have bought into an ideology, the promotion of a pseudo-religion for those who hope there is no God. Huxley wrote in the same essay: “The sense of spiritual relief which comes from rejecting the idea of God as a superhuman being is enormous.” [26] This indicates, perhaps, one of the motives behind scientism.

Scientism commits the fallacy criticized by Gaudium et spes of “unduly transgressing the limits of the positive sciences, [and contending] that everything can be explained by this kind of scientific reasoning alone....” [27] The document continues: “today’s progress in science and technology can foster a certain exclusive emphasis on observable data and a kind of agnosticism about everything else. For the methods of investigation which these sciences use can be wrongly considered as the supreme rule of seeking the whole truth.” [28]

In opposition to scientism, Gaudium et spes defends true science. True science recognizes its difference from religion. Lord Sacks simplified the issue nicely when he said that science takes things apart to see how they work, while religion puts things together to see what they mean. [29] In this way they cannot conflict or collapse into each other. “For,” as Galileo wrote in his “Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina” (1615), “the Holy Scripture and nature derive equally from the Godhead....”[30]

In its discussion of culture Gaudium et spes reminds us that different objects of culture must be studied with different methods. It reminds us that one must view each discipline in light of the whole of reality.[31] The document recognized that there are two orders of knowledge called faith and reason. Each must use the proper methods in its own domain. This means that the “legitimate autonomy of human culture and especially of the sciences” was affirmed.[32] In this way, what I call the cultural logic of Gaudium et spes protects us from ap-
plying one method to everything because man and culture are of a dual nature.

Finally, what may be said regarding Gaudium et spes and statism? Statism results when the state refuses to be itself and strives to take on the functions of religion. This can happen by the use of ideologies idolizing free-market individualism and militarism, or it can happen by cutting off the state from first principles (purporting that they are “dangerous”) effectively making it a law unto itself. This leaves the state without limitations to define reality according to the one in power.

In response, the deep understanding of human nature and the cultural logic implied in Gaudium et spes directs our attention to the idea of the common good. Because human beings have a social nature and a spiritual destiny, indicated by the fundamental questions that they ask, culture needs a proper independence. Spiritual liberty within the culture must be maintained in order for the intermediary institutions of that culture to thrive. This independence is an integral part of the common good of a people, which the Church and the state must both safeguard. According to Gaudium et spes, the common good is the sum of conditions that make it possible for individuals, families, and institutions to obtain their own perfection.[33] That which is common is the good of people, and people are, by nature, body and soul. This is why humans can only achieve their true good by exercising their own spiritual and intellectual powers to improve themselves. It is also why big government is an impediment to realizing our fullest human potential. The principle of subsidiarity is fundamental to the common good.

Thus, political authority must be exercised within the limits of the moral order so as to respect the proper liberty needed for the full development of the person. Rather than make itself into a god by deciding what is good and evil, the state must protect the common good and recognize the true freedom of human culture within which Church and state operate in their independent and autonomous fields, though in cooperation with each other since they serve the same people. [34] In this way, the nature of man and the nature of culture provide limits to the state by pointing to things beyond its jurisdiction.

In conclusion, Gaudium et spes and the inauguration of the New Evangelization gives us a confident and ecumenical orientation toward the modern world. It supplies a robust understanding of human nature capable for responding to nihilism. Gaudium et spes also offers a cultural logic. Learning to think in terms of culture points the New Evangelization toward its proper field (culture) where Church and world can meet in a myriad of ways to their mutual benefit. Such a logic also helps us with wise discernment by awareness of cultural duality. This discernment assists us to know at what point the dialogue has ended and when resistance to harmful cultural tendencies must begin. The cultural logic of Gaudium et spes aids the discovery of new things by thinking with tradition. And it un-masks the pretentions of scientism and statism by insisting on the true dignity and vocation of science and politics.

Endnotes:
[8] Ibid., § 1.
[9] Ibid., § 4.
[14] Ibid., § 14.
[15] Ibid., § 10.
[16] Ibid., § 53.
[17] Ibid., § 58.


[28] Ibid., § 57.


[32] Ibid., § 59.

[33] Ibid., § 74.

[34] Ibid., §§ 74, 76.
Since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, scholars have debated which conciliar document was the most foundational. Some point to the Constitution on Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium), since it was the first document approved by the Council and went on to mark the daily life of Catholics by the dramatic liturgical reform it engendered.[1] Others prioritize the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium) because of its explicit ecclesiology.[2] It is also possible to propose, as the Council’s most foundational document, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum), despite the fact that it was one of the last approved.[3] In this essay, I will discuss how this proposition remains true today and whether it is likely to into the future.

The Roots of Dei Verbum

None of the conciliar documents appeared from thin air. The decades before Vatican II were marked by intense discussions around complicated theological issues; these formed a backdrop for the drafting of the first documents (technically, schemata) to be considered at the Council itself. The Church had struggled throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with modern ideas, scientific developments, and secular influences and their impact on the faith. We need not recount the well-known stories of the anti-Modernist campaign or the crisis of Americanism, and the like. We do, however, need to take a quick glance at how Biblical Studies fared in this environment, because these influences, in fact, set the stage for the struggles that focused immediately on the first schema, which eventually become Dei Verbum.

For centuries, the Catholic Church and its faithful had basically treated the Bible at face value, interpreting all of its historical and spiritual claims as absolute. Since it was the “Word of God,” how could it be anything other than literally true? With the onset of modern scientific methods of studying Scripture, known as the historical critical method(s), scholars began to see cracks in the presumed historical veneer of the biblical books. At first, their attention was cast on the Old Testament, the Pentateuch in particular, where some questioned the Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Bible. Quickly, however, the New Testament came into view, with questions arising particularly around the historical reliability of the Gospels.

The Catholic Church’s immediate response to these developments was to reject them. To this end, in 1893, Pope Leo XIII issued a cautionary encyclical, Providentissimus Deus, which directly addressed methodological developments in the study of Sacred Scripture. What is most remarkable about this encyclical, as we read it today, is its fairly balanced approach to new developments in Scripture studies given the predominance of literal habits of reading sacred texts. While Pope Leo cautioned Catholic exegetes to embark on new research from the perspective of faith and from within the Church’s doctrinal framework, he also encouraged them to make good use of the modern methods of Scripture study, availing themselves of linguistic, archaeological, and scientific tools, in order that the meaning of biblical texts might be amplified for the faithful. In the late nineteenth century, this document read like a breath of fresh air. It represented the opening of a window for Catholic biblical scholars and lifted the cloud of working under the threat of ecclesiastical censure, which prevented scholars from investigating anything that might conflict with the established opinions of the Holy See.
This openness, however, was short-lived. From 1905 to 1915, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, which Pope Leo XIII had created in 1902 (in part to monitor and guide these new developments in Biblical Studies), issued fourteen responses condemning particular propositions gaining ground at the time. Among the condemnations, scholars were asked to abandon the notion that Moses himself was not the sole author of the first five books of the Bible. Moreover, numerous Catholic exegetes came under suspicion and were even silenced for advancing “novel ideas.” The winds had shifted and the momentum that had been gained under Pope Leo seemed forever lost.

Yet another milestone in Biblical Studies occurred in 1943 with the fiftieth anniversary of Providentissimus Deus. Pope Pius XII, whose disposition toward modern developments in the scholarly study of the Bible was generally open, issued his own encyclical on Scripture, Divino Afflante Spiritu. Pius XII not only praised Leo’s earlier encyclical, but went even further, virtually giving Catholic scholars permission to use every available means of investigating the Bible and its background, confident that the truth of Sacred Scripture would not be lost in the process, but that its meaning could be better understood. While the encyclical still cautioned scholars to conduct research from a faith-based perspective, the encouragement it gave to biblical scholars in supporting their professional work was a very significant step forward.

The recurring tension between novelty and caution in the early twentieth century is important to note, because it essentially constituted the situation in Biblical Studies just before Vatican II. Despite Pius XII’s Encyclical, some notable Catholic exegetes, such as Stanislas Lyonnet and Max Zerwick, were delated and censured by the Holy See on the eve of the Council for proliferating dangerous doctrines.[4]

The First Schema, the Controversies, and the Long Process

The mixed attitude toward the scholarly study of Scripture described above helped to set the stage for a battle that was to erupt as soon as the first draft of a constitution on divine revelation was proposed to the Council fathers. Because the Holy Office had directed the drafting of the documents, there was already suspicion among some of the Council fathers about the contents of some schemata.[5] So when the first schema on revelation, De fontibus revelationis, was proposed, controversy erupted. One after another, numerous significant Council fathers stood up to oppose the document, calling for it to be withdrawn and entirely rewritten. The problem was that neither those opposed to the schema, nor those in favor of it, had the necessary two-thirds vote required to resolve the issue.

For some days, the Council seemed stymied, with its future in jeopardy. Then, after some negotiation, Pope John XIII himself intervened, a move he had tried to avoid lest he should be seen as interfering with the deliberations of the Council fathers. His instructions were that the schema was to be withdrawn and entirely reworked. With a stroke of genius, he established a “mixed commission” headed by two of the most polar opposites in the Roman Curia, Alfredo Ottaviani, head of the Holy Office, and an influential drafter of the first schemata of the Council, and Augustin Bea, head of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, and a biblical scholar.

No one could foresee that this commission would work throughout the next four sessions of the Council to arrive finally at an acceptable proposal for a Dogmatic Constitution. It underwent numerous drafts, thousands of amendments, and involved several heated debates over controverted issues, such as the nature and truth of the Scriptures, the historicity of the Gospels, and the complex relationship between Scripture, tradition, and the teaching authority of the Church on faith and morals. By then, a new Pope had been elected, Paul VI, who was leading the Church and carefully shepherding the Council to its conclusion. Unlike his predecessor, Paul VI had no qualms about intervening in Council deliberations, keeping close tabs on the debates and sending to the Council fathers written instructions, through intermediaries, sometimes ambiguous as to intent and authority.

The entire process was extremely long and complicated and need not be rehearsed here.[6] All told, the constitution existed in five different schemata during the council, not counting the two earlier forms that Ottaviani’s commission had produced prior to the first schema, which was given to the Council fathers during the first session, in November, 1962. What must also be acknowledged in this narrative is that various theologians worked behind the scenes, often as periti or expert advisors, to affect the final outcome. Even the Pontifical Biblical Commission influenced the last draft, when they issued their instruction, “On the Historical Truth of the Gospels” (Sancta Mater Ecclesia) on April 21, 1964. The heart of this document’s teaching appears in paragraph 19 of Dei Verbum. On the issue of the historical reliability of the Gospels, which the Constitution affirms several times in the same paragraph, it also states explicitly that the Gospels exhibit at least three distinct but overlapping layers of tradition: (1) the historical Jesus; (2) the oral preaching of the apostles; and (3) and the collecting, writing and editing process done by the evangelists. Implicit in this scenario is that the Gospels are not necessarily ‘literally’ true in every detail, as the process allowed for accretions and alterations over time. This teaching now appears in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (#126).

Finally, on November 18, 1965, only weeks before the Council closed on December 8, the Council fathers overwhelmingly approved Dei Verbum with a favorable vote of 2,344 out
of 2,350. Despite the length of the process, and to a large degree, the concessions which were made to get there, the Dogmatic Constitution ranks as one of the greatest achievements of the Council. Our task from this point is to explain why this is so.

The Content of Dei Verbum

To begin, we need an overview of Dei Verbum and a summary of its contents. The outline is straightforward. Paragraph numbers are in parentheses.

Prologue (1)

Chapter 1: Divine Revelation Itself (2-6)

Chapter 2: Transmission of Divine Revelation (7-10)

Chapter 3: Sacred Scripture: Its Divine Inspiration and Interpretation (11-13)

Chapter 4: The Old Testament (14-16)

Chapter 5: The New Testament (17-20)

Chapter 6: Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church (21-26)

Despite its relative brevity (26 paragraphs or roughly 3,000 words in Latin), there can be no doubt regarding its significance as a teaching document. It does not merely address Sacred Scripture. It addresses the concept of divine revelation itself, in which the Scriptures play a crucial role.

The outline itself indicates the prominence given to the concept of divine revelation. The Prologue notably sets the tone for the whole document, addressing the mystery of divine communication by citing a passage from the First Letter of John (1 Jn 1:2-3). It also affirms that the Constitution falls within the tradition of prior magisterial teachings on this theme, namely those of the Council of Trent (1546) and Vatican Council I (1870). Dei Verbum’s teachings were to be seen as continuous with the Church’s prior teaching on the theme of revelation.

Following the Prologue, the Constitution moves logically from the broad concept of divine revelation, through its transmission, to Sacred Scripture in its essentials, especially the key questions of inspiration and interpretation. Only then does it focus on the Old Testament and New Testament, respectively. Finally, it addresses an important pastoral question about the use of Sacred Scripture in the life of the Church. Thus, the Constitution flows from the broadest and most abstract teaching on the Bible to the Bible’s concrete role and importance in the life of the Church.

To offer an overview of the Constitution’s main teachings, I will summarize briefly each chapter, beginning with the Prologue.

Despite its brevity, the Prologue is critical to Dei Verbum. The opening words give it its title in Latin, meaning “Word of God,” from the first phrase, “Hearing the Word of God reverently and proclaiming it confidently…” This expression places emphasis on the reception of God’s communication. The Church first hears the Word of God in order to be able to proclaim it. What follows is a beautiful quotation from the First Letter of John, which emphasizes the personal nature of revelation as God’s reaching out to humanity. Finally, the Prologue concludes with a mention of the three theological virtues, expressing the desire that faith grow into hope and then into love.

In the first chapter, the authors take up the question of the nature of revelation. Using a host of biblical citations, this chapter demonstrates God’s desire to communicate with human beings, revealing the mystery of the divine will. It basically offers a terse summary of salvation history, jumping from Abraham to Moses to Jesus Christ. This revelatory process shows how the invisible God reached out to friendship to human beings through his “deeds and words,” showing his love for humanity, which finds its ultimate expression in Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the “good news” (gospel). A striking feature of this presentation is its perspective on the Trinity, where the roles of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are carefully balanced, even if the Christological and pneumatological emphases are its focus. The chapter also emphasizes the truth of this revelation and the fact that it is accomplished in such a way that human beings can comprehend it. Mystery it may be, but it is knowable.

Progressing logically, Chapter Two discusses the transmission of God’s revelation. Here, the Christological and pneumatological aspects of divine revelation come into sharper focus, this time with reference to the role of Christ and the Spirit in communicating divine revelation and preserving its authenticity. The truth of revelation, according to the text, is rooted in Christ’s very person and in his own proclamation of the gospel; but in having commissioned the apostles to carry it forward through their own oral proclamation, the truth of the gospel also lies in the apostolic tradition. The Holy Spirit guided this “apostolic preaching,” which the Church kept alive and eventually included in the canon of Sacred Scriptures.

At this point, the chapter makes an extremely important assertion with two phrases: “both Scripture and tradition must be accepted and honored with equal devotion and reverence”; and “Tradition and Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the word of God […]” These statements demonstrate a clear Catholic principle, distinct from the teaching of other Christian denominations. Scripture and tradition constitute one unified means of revelation. They are not two separate sources. The text goes on to complicate matters some-
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what by adding the term “Magisterium,” as if it were somehow a separate reality from tradition, which is never fully defined in the text. What is clear is that the Holy Spirit guarantees the Church’s authoritative interpretation of both Scripture and tradition, for it is the same Spirit who acts in both.

The third chapter narrows its focus to the Sacred Scriptures themselves, addressing their inspiration and interpretation. Nowhere does Dei Verbum adopt a single theory of inspiration. Rather, the Constitution asserts the inspiration of the Scriptures through the Holy Spirit, who guided the human authors of the Bible to ensure that their writings would express the proper divine message. What we should not miss here is that God and the human writers both are affirmed as true “authors” of the Scriptures. The Constitution also notes the importance of genres, the different types of literature found in the Bible, and it affirms the utility of the Scriptures as a reliable source for teaching and moral instruction, using a quotation from Second Timothy (2 Tim 3:16-17).

After a general exposition of Scripture, the text moves in the next two chapters, respectively, to the Old Testament and New Testament. It affirms the importance of both, while clearly noting the priority of the New Testament as the fulfillment of the Old and the goal of all revelation because of its focus on Jesus Christ. Of utmost importance is the affirmation of the truth of all the Scriptures with regard to the divine message pertaining to salvation. The Constitution also adopts the threefold process of the formation of the Gospels that the Pontifical Biblical Commission had taught in its 1964 document, Sancta Mater Ecclesia, referenced above. The three levels – the time of the historical Jesus, the oral preaching of the earliest apostles, and the time of the evangelists – allow for an acknowledged complex process of collecting, writing and editing the traditions about Jesus, all of which are evident in the canonical Gospels. Implicit in this framework is the possibility of accretions and even some distortions in these traditions, but the ‘truth’ of the Scriptures pertaining to salvation is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit.

The final chapter elucidates many aspects of the use of Scripture in the pastoral life of the Church. Unsurprisingly, the text strongly affirms the role of the bishops, as successors to the apostles, to proclaim the good news of revelation faithfully through their preaching, assisted by priests and others charged with preaching and teaching in the Church. The explicit ecumenical nature of the Council also comes to the fore in this chapter. While giving time-honored priority to the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible, it also calls for new ecumenical translations ‘from the original texts,’ which would help promote easy access to the widest number of Christians possible. As for professional exegetes, Dei Verbum encourages them in their study of the sacred writ, but also reminds them to do their task “in accordance with the mind of the Church.” This advice is consistent with the prior teaching of Leo XIII and Pius XII in their respective encyclicals on the Scriptures.

Dei Verbum concludes with explicitly scriptural images taken from several biblical passages, consistent with the way it began. The conclusion expresses the desire that the Word of God, what it calls the “treasure of revelation,” which “stands forever,” be extended as far and as widely as possible, that it may ultimately triumph in the world. It concludes with the hope that devotion to the Word will bring about great spiritual renewal in the Church and beyond.

Evaluating Dei Verbum

Fifty years, relative to the Church’s actual age, is not an exceptionally long period of time. Given that the average occurrence of a Church Council is only once every one-hundred years or so (with Ecumenical Councils, such as Vatican II, being even rarer), we are perhaps, after only half-a-century, not in the best position yet to offer a definitive evaluation of the impact of Dei Verbum. Despite our proximity to the event of Vatican II, I think it is still possible to make some important observations on the basis of our experience so far. Seven factors strike me as significant and even suggest that Dei Verbum was the Second Vatican Council’s most important achievement.

The first factor is the designation of Dei Verbum as a “Dogmatic Constitution” resulting from an Ecumenical Council. As per the hierarchy of ecclesiastical texts, the Dogmatic Constitution is the weightiest in terms of authority. Of the many texts produced at Vatican II, merely four were ranked as Constitutions, and of these only one other was ranked particularly as a “Dogmatic Constitution” (i.e., Lumen Gentium). As was pointed out in 1985, when the Synod of Bishops convened to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Council’s closing, the four conciliar constitutions provide the “interpretive key” to all the other documents of the Council.[7] In the same passage, it emphasizes that one should not press the distinction between the pastoral and dogmatic nature of the Council, as if they were separate and opposing categories. While it is true that Vatican II proclaimed no new dogmas, it nonetheless refined and updated the Church’s understanding of major dogmatic teachings, such as revelation.

A second factor concerns the topic of revelation. Dei Verbum marks the first time in the Church’s history that the topic of divine revelation was formally investigated on its own. While Trent and Vatican I both promulgated teachings related to this theme, neither addresses it in the formal way that Vatican II does. The theme of divine revelation is such an all-encompassing, fundamental concept, which touches so many
other areas of theology, that it is truly a noteworthy contribution of the Council.

The third point reinforces the previous one. The Council’s own Doctrinal Commission made the judgment that, despite its later adoption, Dei Verbum should be considered “in a way the first of all the constitutions of this Council, so that its Preface introduces them all to a certain extent.”[8] This is a remarkable affirmation. When one considers that the Preface of the Constitution expresses the basic nature of revelation as divine outreach to humanity, which is nevertheless seen in many different ways (e.g., creation, the Sacred Scriptures, the sacraments, etc.), one can see the far-reaching implications the Constitution has on so many other facets of the Council’s teaching. It is for this reason that I think the Commission’s judgment should not be casually dismissed as hyperbole; it is rather an authentic statement by the Church regarding the significance of Dei Verbum.

The fourth reason to view Dei Verbum as the Council’s most important achievement concerns its implications for the treatment of Sacred Scripture itself. It obviously accords rightful significance to the Bible as the special locus of divine communication or divine revelation. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we are assured that the Bible communicates the Word of God and all that is necessary for salvation. Think for a moment of just how important Biblical Studies were for the success of the Council. Scholars today often rightly point to the influence of significant theologians working behind-the-scenes, especially those belonging to the European movement known as nouvelle théologie (e.g., Yves Congar, Karl Rahner, Jean Danielou, Henri de Lubac, Gérard Philips, etc.) What methods did these theologians use for their work? Two influences loom large in their orientation, namely use of the Bible and of the Early Church Fathers as main resources.[9] In going ‘back to the sources’ (ressourcement), they began to reformulate aspects of theology that would leave their mark on virtually all the documents of Vatican II. Paradoxically, by stepping back into time in order to retrieve the sources, these theologians actually helped the Church move forward. The fact that biblical scholars had been quietly plodding along since the mid-nineteenth century (at least) proved to be crucial in terms of preparing the ground for the Council. In some ways, one could consider Dei Verbum itself a ‘fruit’ of an enlightened stream of biblical exegesis since Providentissimus Deus and Divino Afflante Spiritu, discussed above. This biblical perspective impacted all the Council’s documents. Scripture became one of the major ‘lenses’ through which the Church’s teaching would be studied, refined, and nuanced. Dei Verbum was somewhat the culmination of this long process, but its new beginning also pointed to the future. This singular importance of a profound biblical perspective found in Dei Verbum highlights its longstanding impact.

A fifth reason to consider in evaluating the critical importance of Dei Verbum is the careful balance it struck between continuity and novelty. While it is true that Pope Benedict XVI, in particular, insisted on viewing Vatican II in terms of its continuity with all prior Church teachings, one cannot reasonably deny certain novelties in Dei Verbum. (I have specifically avoided the word ‘rupture’ in this context, substituting it with novelties, for reasons I will later explain.) The novelties, as well as the continuities, of Dei Verbum need to be appreciated. On the side of continuity, I point to the following, to name just a few:

- continuous reference to teachings from Trent and Vatican Council I, among other Councils, concerning the canon, inspiration, and truth of the Scriptures;
- multiple references to biblical texts and Fathers of the Church, especially notables like Jerome, Augustine, Irenaeus, and John Chrysostom;
- affirmation that the Sacred Scriptures were inspired by the Holy Spirit, with God as their author;
- reiteration of the concept of revelation as God’s mysterious but direct self-communication to human beings, of which Jesus Christ is both the goal and foremost expression;
- affirmation that both the Old and New Testaments are fully God’s Word, and that the Old Testament is hidden in the New, while the New Testament fulfills and makes fully understood the Old;
- encouragement to use the Bible as a reliable and divinely-inspired guide for teaching, moral instruction, prayer, and the spiritual growth;
- mention of the time-honored place of the Vulgate in Catholic scriptural reading;
- preservation of the role of the Magisterium of the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to guarantee the faithful interpretation of the Bible.

Many more could be added to this list to show how Dei Verbum was in line with earlier Church teaching. And yet, some novel aspects introduced by Dei Verbum should not be overlooked. A short list would include the following:

- extensive treatment of the mystery of revelation in person-alistic terms, employing the language of friendship, and parental imagery (as in a mother speaking to her children), with a concomitant avoidance of propositional language;
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- explanation of the complex interrelationship between Sacred Scripture and tradition as one unified source of divine revelation;
- analogical use of the Incarnation to explain the Bible as equally the Word of God and the product of real human authors;
- explicit adoption of the teaching of the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s identification of three layers of tradition within the canonical Gospels (Sancta Mater Ecclesia), thus acknowledging a more complex process for their birth;
- the call for complete and easy access to the Bible in order that all the faithful might read it;
- the presence of an ecumenical orientation in the Constitution, consistent with the other conciliar documents, but especially in the call for ecumenical translations of the Bible;
- the refusal to invoke the word “inerrancy” to defend the basic truth of Scripture, instead asserting “that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures” (Dei Verbum, 11, emphases added);
- the lack of any anathemas, despite evident tensions in the decades prior to the Council between Catholic exegetes and Roman Curial officials over the proper interpretation of Scripture.

Some might quibble with one or another of the points or categories I have identified as novel, but this list illustrates sufficiently that there are aspects in Dei Verbum which make it stand out from the past. The distinguished Church historian John O’Malley has rightly emphasized that the shift in language in many documents at Vatican II should be seen neither as accidental nor insignificant.[10] Dei Verbum, which was the result of many battles fought over the use of theological language, represents part of this shift.

A sixth aspect of Dei Verbum’s preeminence comes to mind. Although it has long been considered a neglected document, in fact, along with the dogmatic Constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium,[11] I suggest it had the most immediate and direct impact on Catholic life after the Council. The reason is simple. Nothing more directly touched the lives of Catholics in the pew than the dramatic changes in liturgy that took place quickly after the Council. Indeed, some thought the changes too rapid, with inadequate preparation. As if overnight, the Mass changed. It was in the vernacular rather than Latin. The readings at Mass were no longer a repetitive list of familiar passages but a much broader selection from both Old and New Testaments thanks to the introduction of a three-year cycle Lectionary for Sundays and a two-year cycle Lectionary for weekday Masses. Dei Verbum played a significant role in this change because it had called for greater access to the Bible and for more prominence to be given to the Bible in Catholic life.

Liturgy was not the only sphere of influence, however. In the wake of Dei Verbum, Catholic Bible Study programs (e.g., Little Rock Bible Study), biblical institutes (e.g., Georgetown), and conferences (e.g., Misericordia) sprang up almost overnight. In a very short space of time, indeed, there emerged an immeasurable quantity of Catholic scholarly writing on the Bible. Three notable Catholic scholars, Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, Roland Murphy, edited and published an authoritative one-volume commentary on the Bible in 1968, The Jerome Biblical Commentary, only three years after Dei Verbum and the end of the Council.[12] All the contributors to this publication were Catholic scholars, exhibiting how quickly Catholic biblical scholarship began to flourish once the Council had set the direction, bringing it on par with Protestant biblical scholarship.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the important strides made in regards to the Catholic approach to Sacred Scripture is the speed at which they took place. The encouragement received from the Council through Dei Verbum cannot be underestimated on this account. Should anyone take exception to some one or another of the six points establishing the basis of Dei Verbum as the Council’s greatest achievement, I suggest there is yet a seventh compelling reason. I refer to what might be deemed the official ‘fruits’ of Dei Verbum. They deserve their own special consideration.

The Fruits of Dei Verbum

Dei Verbum has been especially productive since the end of the Council, not only promoting Catholic Bible studies and more familiarity of Scripture among Catholics, but in fostering three more official “fruits.”

The first is found in a series of post-conciliar teachings of the Pontifical Biblical Commission. Although Pope Paul VI had reduced the teaching authority of the PBC in his reform of the Curia in 1971, it nevertheless remained a resource for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which has continued to produce helpful documents concerning the Catholic understanding of Scripture, including the following:

- On Sacred Scripture and Christology (1984);
- Unity and Diversity in the Church (1988);
- The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (1993);
- The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible (2001);
These principles are intended to lead to authentic interpretation and its living tradition, not simply as independent contractors. Catholic Dei Verbum contains, but also to do so within an ecclesial context. Catholic Dei Verbum's ability to supply the more generous presentation of the Bible, but its deferral to Dei Verbum in the Constitution, but the main point is clear. Dei Verbum totally orient its teaching on Sacred Scripture. Yet there is one place where certain limitations in the Catechism become evident. When it comes to citing the Bible, the Catechism tends to revert to an earlier style of biblical proof texting or simple assumption of the historicity of details in the biblical texts. Perhaps this is unavoidable in the catechism genre, where the purpose is to show the biblical roots of Catholic doctrine. But it does point to an ongoing limitation of the practice of biblical exegesis in Catholic teachings, even if the theoretical principles are clearly enunciated.

The third fruit is found in Verbum Domini, Pope Benedict XVI’s post-synodal apostolic exhortation on Sacred Scripture. This is likely the most important and authoritative Catholic teaching on the Bible since Dei Verbum. Verbum Domini resulted directly from the Synod of Bishops in 2008 on the Word of God. As such, it is a much longer text that addresses a wide range of pertinent aspects of a Catholic approach to the Bible (124 numbered paragraphs). We cannot do justice to this exhortation here, but a few worthy observations should point to its significance.

Note first that the title alludes to a liturgical act. Verbum Domini, as well as its English equivalent, “The Word of the Lord,” is the proclamation after a reading at Mass, to which the congregation responds, “Deo Gratias,” or “Thanks be to God.” This liturgical allusion is telling. It points to the privileged place the Scriptures hold in Catholic liturgy. In fact, this is where most Catholics encounter the Word of God, which makes the quality of our liturgical proclamation of the Word of God all that more important (e.g., reading, preaching).

Note also the context of this exhortation. Pope Benedict explicitly mentioned the nearly century-long tradition of Catholic teaching on the Bible, extending from Pope Leo XIII, through Pius XII, and down to Dei Verbum itself. He places his own exhortation in this context, which strengthens one of the key points he made about interpretations of the Second Vatican Council: the presence of continuity in the Church’s teachings. Significantly, the exhortation quotes or explicitly draws attention to Dei Verbum some forty times, but occasionally the quotes are used in a different context, which takes some of the novel edge off the Dogmatic Constitution’s original text. Nevertheless, Pope Benedict, who was a peritus at the
Council and who had helped shape Dei Verbum, interprets his own exhortation under its influence.

The exhortation’s content is broad and diverse, but one controversial point is worth emphasizing. Some scholars see this document as a step backwards in terms of Catholic exegesis. The primary reason is that it asserts serious limitations to the historical critical method, and clearly favors theological and spiritual exegesis in a way that flourished in the patristic period. Pope Benedict made no secret of his preferences in this regard. So this critique is true, but it overlooks one important fact. Nowhere does the exhortation condemn either modern exegesis, in general, or historical critical method, in particular. Moreover, the exhortation favorably quotes the 1993 teaching of the PBC’s document on biblical interpretation, which calls the historical critical method “indispensable” as a starting point for exegesis (Verbum Domini, 32). Some might call this disingenuous and not really intended, but to overlook it is to deny its import. Especially when one sees this exhortation in the extended context from Leo XIII through Vatican II, we have to accept the teaching of Verbum Domini at face value, even if it does not promote modern Biblical Studies in exactly the same way as earlier documents. I think Benedict’s desire, rather, was to seek a balance between excessively technical (and sometimes historically-skeptical) exegesis and that which remains open to the deep spiritual message of Sacred Scripture. This is not an unrealistic expectation. Dei Verbum itself called for Catholics to use the Scriptures to greater effect in their lives, and drew attention to its utility for moral and spiritual guidance.

The fruits of Dei Verbum, then, are impressive. Cumulatively, I believe these seven points demonstrate that Dei Verbum, despite its somewhat neglected status, can be seen as one of the Council’s most important and successful teachings. No doubt the other constitutions of Vatican II have made their impact felt in the last fifty years, as well; but in terms of far-reaching ramifications, Dei Verbum still stands out among the pack. As the 1985 Synod insisted, all four constitutions provide preferences to the historical critical method, and clearly favors theological and spiritual exegesis in a way that flourished in the patristic period. Pope Benedict made no secret of his preferences in this regard. So this critique is true, but it overlooks one important fact. Nowhere does the exhortation condemn either modern exegesis, in general, or historical critical method, in particular. Moreover, the exhortation favorably quotes the 1993 teaching of the PBC’s document on biblical interpretation, which calls the historical critical method “indispensable” as a starting point for exegesis (Verbum Domini, 32). Some might call this disingenuous and not really intended, but to overlook it is to deny its import. Especially when one sees this exhortation in the extended context from Leo XIII through Vatican II, we have to accept the teaching of Verbum Domini at face value, even if it does not promote modern Biblical Studies in exactly the same way as earlier documents. I think Benedict’s desire, rather, was to seek a balance between excessively technical (and sometimes historically-skeptical) exegesis and that which remains open to the deep spiritual message of Sacred Scripture. This is not an unrealistic expectation. Dei Verbum itself called for Catholics to use the Scriptures to greater effect in their lives, and drew attention to its utility for moral and spiritual guidance.

Dei Verbum and the Way Forward

At this point, one might pose the question about how Dei Verbum can, or will, impact the future teaching of the Catholic Church on biblical matters. No one has a crystal ball, and if there were to be another Ecumenical Council in our lifetime, it is difficult to intuit what progress might be made on any number of questions. Nonetheless, I think we can point to a few ways in which Dei Verbum might serve as a helpful “lamp unto our feet” (Ps 119:105).

First, we should recall that this Dogmatic Constitution was forged on the basis of compromise. Various factions contributed to its formulation over an extended period of time, and inevitably, when the time came for clear statements, a give-and-take process took over which left no one fully pleased. That is why interpreters of the Constitution can sometimes cite a passage to support one side of an argument while another group can cite the same passage to the opposite effect. An example is the expression “without error.” Lifted from its context, and not knowing that the Council fathers fought seriously over avoiding the term “inerrancy,” which was too tied to biblical fundamentalism, it is easy to invoke this passage to claim that the Bible is inerrant historically, as well as in matters of faith. This is not Dei Verbum’s teaching, and later Church teachings, such as from the PBC or papal exhortations and encyclicals, can be helpful in moving forward. As important as Dei Verbum is, it is not the last word on the topic of revelation. Moreover, even though the final text of the Constitution is the only authoritative one, understanding the many difficult discussions that occurred to arrive at the final text is most instructive and helps to orient its proper interpretation.

A second aspect of this question is the open-ended nature of professional Biblical Studies. As the 1993 PBC teaching on Catholic biblical interpretation makes clear, there is no one definitive method which is Catholic. All methods have strengths and weaknesses. The only approach clearly incompatible with a Catholic approach is fundamentalism. Dei Verbum simply did not address these kinds of questions. It affirmed the need to use modern, scientific tools to explore the Scriptures, but it never delved into methods. Given the fact that a plethora of new modern methods of exegesis and interpretation have come to the fore since Vatican II, this is likely to remain an open field for a long time to come. Dei Verbum does not shut the door on such developments, but asks that Catholic exegetes do their work responsibly, within the context of the Church and under the faithful guidance of the Magisterium. As a biblical scholar, I do not find this expectation unreasonable or delimiting. It is simply a sound principle of Catholic exegesis.

Finally, there is the question of authoritative interpretations of Scripture. Some Catholics think naively that the Catholic Church regularly proclaims the authoritative interpretation of virtually any biblical passage. This is not the teaching of Dei Verbum either. Nor is this the practice of the Catholic Church on a regular basis. When the Constitution insists that the Magisterium retains the right and duty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret the Scriptures authoritatively, this applies in cases of doubt and when doctrinal issues are at stake. What is surprising is how few times in history the Church has exercised this right. There are few biblical interpretations defined doctrinally by the Church, and most of the handful of cases concern a decision on what a given passage
does not mean, rather than what it does (e.g., on the brothers and sisters of Jesus, Mark 3:32).

Clearly, then, Dei Verbum is a seminal text in our day for a Catholic appreciation of Scripture. But in what way(s) does it point us toward the future? I suggest at least five possibilities.

Five Paths for the Future

First, Dei Verbum is a text that incorporates both continuity and novelty in its orientation. Note that I prefer to avoid the term discontinuity, or even worse, rupture. Both terms are too harsh for what Vatican II represents, especially in its Constitution on divine revelation. Rather, there are novel aspects, as I have pointed out above, yet the text is clearly presented in line with previous Church teaching on the topic. Both continuity and novelty are essential, especially if we are truly to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Dei Verbum balances both aspects very well.

Second, the Constitution’s assertion that the Magisterium serves the Word of God and is not its master orients us to the future, as well (Dei Verbum, 10). There is need of much more work on the relationship between Scripture, tradition and the Magisterium to flesh out this insight.

Third, the Constitution’s well known insistence on divine revelation as a personal invitation from God to enter into relationship will continue to guide our future understanding of the mystery of God’s outreach to humanity. Sadly, many Catholics still do not have a full appreciation of this personal dimension. Moreover, the average Catholic’s familiarity with the Word of God as a means to know Christ is seriously wanting. We can do much more in the future to act on this teaching of Dei Verbum.

Fourth, the complex relationship between the Old and New Testaments is a perennial challenge. Many Catholics still wonder about the value of the Old Testament in its own right, and some still naively view the God of the Old Testament as different from the revelation found in the New Testament. Dei Verbum addresses this question in basic ways, but only scratching the surface. The PBC’s later teaching, however, has helped somewhat to deepen our understanding of this topic.

Finally, in an era of evident ‘cooling’ of ecumenical fervor, this Constitution can help us rediscover the importance of this most novel of orientations. The very notion of allowing Scripture to become the “soul of theology” (Dei Verbum, 24) still has a long way to go, but in this process, we share with our Protestant sisters and brothers the same desire that the Word might foster knowledge of Christ, the Word-made-flesh, and the salvation he brings.

These five are hardly the only possible directions the Church might take in the future, but I believe they are each firmly rooted in the unified vision of the Constitution and have the force to help push us toward the next level of comprehension of the mystery of divine revelation. No one can predict what the next fifty years will hold for theology and the Church’s implementation of Vatican II, but I suspect when the centenary of Dei Verbum finally arrives, all will marvel once more at how profound, how prescient, and how significant this short document, which emerged from a long, circuitous, and difficult process in the early 1960s really was. As the Constitution itself concludes, citing Second Thessalonians, may the Word of God indeed “spread rapidly and be glorified” (Dei Verbum, 26). ■

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ENDNOTES


[16] *Catechism*, #126; *Dei Verbum*, § 19.


Hans Urs von Balthasar & the Conciliar Legacy

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Vatican II was a moment of unparalleled significance in the contemporary history of the Roman Catholic Church. It signaled to many a spirit of hope and new life breathing through the Church, especially in the area of the Church’s dialogue with the modern world.

Gaudium et Spes, the document that most explicitly identifies the call of Christians to transform their cultures, stands as one of the most important legacies of Vatican II. The Second Vatican Council was also marked by a deeper sense of communion both within and beyond the Church. By means of liturgical reforms and new emphases on collegiality, ecumenism, and interreligious dialogue, the laity, ecclesiastics, and consecrated persons were engaged in a manner hitherto unseen. All of these developments, in the name of aggiornamento, seemed to indicate signs of a Church moving “forward.”

The reception of Vatican II, however, resulted in divergent and increasingly divisive responses within the Catholic Church, some of which endure to this day. Debate has raged over the hermeneutics of what happened at the Council: was it an event of continuity or rupture? Should the Church take a step back in implementing the Council’s recommendations, or should it leap forward? Even with the Holy Spirit’s undeniable presence at the Council, the extent and manner of the Church’s openness to the modern world is still a point of disagreement among Catholics. Despite the hope of creating a stronger sense of unity and belonging among its members, as well as with Orthodox and Protestant churches, the Roman Catholic Church in the wake of Vatican II seems beset by persistent disunity and forms of exclusion. Disagreement is evident on issues ranging from liturgy and authority to piety and Christian morality. At the same time, the secularization of Western societies has made many Catholics indifferent to the transforming potential of the Christian message in their daily lives. The combination of certain polarities within the Roman Catholic Church which seem to coalesce around Vatican II and the distance many Catholics feel from the Church points to a struggle that the Church continues to face in the wake of Vatican II.

Swiss-Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) affords, I would argue, a new perspective on Vatican II’s legacy through an emphasis on the Church’s rediscovery of ecclesial mission. Debates centred on evaluating the event of Vatican II as one of either discontinuity or continuity have often manifested themselves as reactions to touchstones of the Council: aggiornamento and ressourcement. The former, some complain, is too forward thinking, while the latter, others complain, is too inclined to retreatment. Balthasar, I believe, had a fulsome appreciation of both “updating the Church” and “a return to the sources,” which he repeatedly demonstrated in his extensive bibliography. Enlivened with the foresight of the deep kinds of fragmentation to which the Council might lead, he provided theological tools capable of addressing a host of controversial issues raised at Vatican II: ecclesial unity, the relation of freedom to authority, and the Church’s engagement with the modern world addressed in both Gaudium et spes and Lumen gentium.

Much can be said by way of introducing Balthasar’s instrumental contributions to the generative reception of Vatican II. He sought to root human freedom in Christ’s freedom. He worked to retrieve a “profile” of the Church capable of conveying the beauty of Christ. He believed strongly in the personal call to holiness and the role of the Church in this sanctifying process. Finally, he was committed to pioneering new responses to the needs of the present age. All of this is not
to suggest that Balthasar’s work, extensive as it was, can independently or without further development address the array of challenges which came to light in the post-conciliar period. It is conceivable, however, that today’s theologians, working from within his general framework, who also adopt a critical stance toward his writings, might help to realize the full achievement of Vatican II. In the sections that follow, I will outline three areas of Balthasar’s theology which show promise of further development: human freedom, the church, and the world.

**Human Freedom**

Balthasar understood all too well the condition of postmodernity and the fragmentation of modern Western consciousness. The potentially powerful legacy of Transcendental Thomism, with its emphasis on the beautiful, the good, and the true, was substantially weakened under the weight of the Second World War, the Cold War, and the technological revolution of the mid-twentieth century. The absence of a shared spiritual horizon, Balthasar thought, in which persons seek to participate in and contribute to the redemption of the world, has led us to abandon our stewardship of the world and of the societies we inhabit.

Central to the problem of the secularization and atomization of the modern world was the problem of human freedom. Freedom and responsibility, therefore, were topics of great importance at Vatican II. Balthasar’s query regarding ‘post-Christian man’ revealed the concern underlying his own account of freedom. Balthasar helped the Council in marking the distinction between true freedom and the freedom to live and let live. He repudiated theories of human freedom rooted in sources outside of the person of Christ. Balthasar explains:

> What then if man, no longer accustomed to taking his standard from the cosmos (now emptied of the divine), refuses to take it from Christ? This is post-Christian man, who cannot return to the pre-Christian fluidity that once existed between man and the cosmos but who, in passing through Christianity, has grown used to the heightening of his creaturely rhythms and wants to hold on to them as if they are his personal hallmark, a gift that now belongs to him entirely.

Balthasar, nevertheless, showed keen awareness of the importance of freedom as a theme and concept of modernity: “In modern times, human freedom is a theme which preoccupies both Christian and non-Christian, and there is a kind of competition as to who can understand this freedom more profoundly, who more effectively put it into practice...”[8] Attuned to the enthusiasm for freedom in his own era, Balthasar reiterated the centrality of Christ in the Christian appropriation of this concept, referring divine and human freedom back to salvific action.

Balthasar’s concern with accounts of human freedom rooted in atheism, agnosticism, and deism can also be seen in his concept of “theodrama.” Emphasizing the asymmetrical relationship between infinite and finite freedom – the kenosis of Christ and importance that finite freedom is grounded in infinite freedom – Balthasar invited individuals to embrace their participation in God’s dramatic action, which itself is freely gratuitous. Embracing our role as protagonists with God in his saving action, Balthasar highlights God’s total self-giving love, Jesus Christ, as the proper basis of all human action. While confident that the answer to human freedom rested on the truth of Revelation, realized most fully in the Paschal Mystery, Balthasar was unwilling to revert to the older idea of the impossibility of salvation outside of the Church. Balthasar did underscore, however, that salvation itself implies God’s judgment and action, and that true freedom cannot be divorced from God’s salvific plan. Moreover, the Church is the ideal ‘place’ where such freedom may be fostered, for Christ, who is with his Church, offers the surest path to integrity, authenticity, and goodness in human deliberation and action.[11]

Yet another feature of Balthasar’s account of human freedom is the Incarnation and Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. The important distinction he introduced here was that God’s capacity to overcome the pain of rejection and to love infinitely through total self-gift were both aspects of true human freedom. Balthasar presents the analogy of God as one who embarks on lawsuit: first God is angry; he is then moved from this anger to pity and finally to mercy, expressed through the gratuitous sacrifice of his only Son, his very self. God’s compassion and merciful sacrifice redeem the very depths of creation. Had God not lived amongst us, a new judgment would not have been born, and the ultimate sacrifice, which redeemed humanity, would not have taken place. One may reject the reality of divine invitation in the two great acts of our salvation – incarnation and the passion and death of Christ – but one cannot deny the fruitfulness of what they suggest with regard to the inseparability of sacrifice from true freedom.[13] In The Moment of Christian Witness, Balthasar laments our reluctance to engage the sacrifice that is linked to freedom, blaming our rational (read: anti-metaphysical) and horizontal (read: secular) modes of deciding and acting.[14] Balthasar’s Christology leads to an understanding of freedom and of the human person that rests on the Christian concept of love, expressed concretely in acts of obedience, self-surrender, and humility – in a word, kenosis.
The Church

Balthasar’s ecclesiology, though often mistaken for an apology for the Church’s hierarchical structure, actually identifies as a primary responsibility of the Church to foster the holiness or fulfilled personhood of its members. Particularly in his work Bernanos: An Ecclesial Existence, Balthasar describes the sanctifying role of the Church. He militates against a linear-top-down modality of being Church to one of circles of perichoretic existence, which places the heart of the Church in the heart of the saints, indeed, in the heart of Christ, and emphasizes a spirituality of communion. Rather than a cleric-centric view of the heart of the Church, Balthasar sees the Church of Love or Marian receptivity to be the Church at its most vibrant and true[15]. This is highlighted in Balthasar’s hope in the laity who in living profoundly holy lives, through a commitment to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, act as a leaven in the secular world. Balthasar also places hope in the diversity of missions and forms or expressions of holiness, all of which require, however, recognition of the Church as a mystery, a sacrament, and a unique gift in the spiritual journey.

In Bernanos, Balthasar notes with the French-Catholic novelist Georges Bernanos how the Church has contributed to her own demise from the perspective of the world. Lack of conviction and the absence of a sense of the mystery, indispensable to the vitality of Christianity, are the chief causes of this demise. Balthasar draws on Bernanos to express concern about the failure of the Church to remain faithful to the sublime mystery with which Christ entrusted her. The very problem, according to both authors, lies in the fact that Christians themselves are unattuned to the mystery at the heart of Christianity. They err persistently in their tendency to reduce Christianity to “a ready-made, self-contained and self-evident affair, which is therefore devoid of any mystery, existing ‘alongside’ the world as a ‘perfect society’ parallel to the other, imperfect one.”[16] Bernanos, not unlike Nietzsche in this regard, highlights the cowardice and weakness of Christians: their “hidden faithlessness.” Balthasar completes Bernanos’ thought suggesting that Christians, through pusillanimity and aversion to personal sacrifice, have been remiss in restoring the role of Christian faith in society. He laments a situation where Christianity is treated “as one idea among many other ideas, no longer the leaven and the grain of wheat, the active principle that, in order to have its effect, must enter the world, die there, and dissolve within it, so that, once it again bursts through to new birth like an ear of corn, it will be both things beyond distinction: the field of the world but transformed into the power of the Word.”[17] The Church undercuts her own relevance, he claims, by her lack of awareness of the simplistic terms to which the secular perspective reduces her. In brief, members of the Church are at times simply ignorant or deafened by the drone of their own voices: “Pious persons doubtless have a lot of things to say to unbelievers, but often they could also have a lot of things to learn from these unhappy brothers, and they risk never knowing what those things are because they never stop talking.”[18] Balthasar means to challenge the Church in order that it may overcome her listlessness, not to say irrelevance, pushing her toward a more passionate fidelity to Christ.

The World

The Christian transformation of the world, for Balthasar, is not the outcome of missionary effort, but one of mystical transfiguration. He resorts to an image of metaphysical radiance; that is, personal holiness radiating from each individual’s deep rootedness in Christ. Since the Church exists explicitly to reveal God’s relationship with humanity, culminating in Christ, it has a particular vocation to incarnate the transformative reality of that relationship in the world. In crafting answers to human questions about love, the Church contributes to the formation of persons – theological persons – and thereby sanctifies the world. These answers, however, may also be found beyond the confines of the Church and Balthasar makes it clear that this possibility not only exists, but even interrogates the Church as to her own fidelity to Christ: “The range of Jesus’ eschatological work is such that he can operate directly, outside the Church; he may give grace to individual persons, and perhaps to groups, enabling them to act according to his mind; the Church must allow for this possibility. [...] Through the sacraments, Christ opens up whole realms to the Church; these the Church herself has to open up to others through her sacramental life. She is commissioned to stand close to Christ’s center of operation, to be the ‘light of the world’ together with him (Jn 8:12; Mt 5:14). Yet she is not identical with his light: it can happen that, bringing her light into some new area, she finds his light shining there already.”[19]

Balthasar does not deny the holiness of non-Christian persons in the world, yet neither does he deny that every expression of holiness is rooted in Christ and given by Christ. Indeed, Balthasar’s concern is less to deny the existence of holiness outside of the Church than to argue – in this age it seems necessary to make this argument anew – for the attainability of personal holiness and, what is more, the instrumental role the Church must play in this regard. Balthasar maintains that the mission and task of the Church is to be a witness to
Christ even as she is clearly not identical to the “Light of the world,” but receives her light from Christ himself. Reconciling in various ways the tensions between time and eternity, humanity and divinity, Balthasar moves us toward a healthier ecclesiology – one that carries us beyond debates of the conciliar legacy to the actual work of becoming holy through the efforts of a Church that makes God’s love incarnate.

Some developments that have emerged after the Council, such as the dramatic plurality and diversity of cultural traditions within the Church, and the expansion of the Roman Catholic Church in Africa and Asia, have led some to argue that Balthasar’s theology might not be entirely suited to the task of commenting on ecclesial mission. A persistent criticism of his theology, for example, is that it is too Euro-centered; that it universalizes the Western and Mediterranean experience of Church. Theologians and philosophers attuned to the global and hybridized character of Christian existence, however, may draw inspiration from Balthasar’s challenging tone and derive a theology centred on kenotic love, rendering the message of holiness both ancient, new, and evermore “catholic” in the fullest sense of that word.

By Way of Conclusion

Balthasar may not have the final word, nor is it necessary for this to be his. I have tried to suggest how some of his theological writings provide great potential for broaching the difficult – even divisive – post-conciliar situation. One of the advantages of reading Balthasar fifty years after the council is that we can see how his work treats with utter seriousness the concerns of modern selfhood, modernity, and secularity, but from within the horizon of a worldview rooted in Christ, which is a horizon from which both ‘sides’ can work. In this way, Balthasar’s theology enriches our reading of the Council documents while raising the limits of the extent of agreement that may be reached on the broad issues explored at Vatican II. His ultimate response to the conciliar legacy points to the need for healing within the Church. But it also points, as I have suggested, to reorientations on freedom, the Church, and society. Balthasar felt these dimensions of the Church’s life were beset by opposing tendencies: time and eternity, the humanity and divinity of Christ, the human and divine aspects of Christ’s Church, the delegation and exercise of authority and freedom and the development of doctrine. These tensions are explored in Balthasar’s Christology, anthropology, and ecclesiology and they open up rather than shut down the conversations we need to be having.

ENDNOTES


[5] E.g. Gaudium et spes, § 1


[10] Ibid., 386.


[13] Balthasar, Theodrama II.


[15] As we see in Dei Verbum § 8, the Marian profile is evident even in Vatican II’s presentation of the passing on of tradition.


[17] Ibid., 252.

[18] Balthasar, Bernanos, 251. It should be noted, for example, that the Church needs to attend particularly to the justifiable moral offense and horror of those who have left the Church on account of the scandal of sexual abuse by clergy that has been uncovered in recent years.

The Church’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: A review of Sacrosanctum concilium fifty years after the close of Vatican Council II

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Introduction: A Fifty-year Retrospective of Vatican II

The year 2015 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council (11 October 1962-8 December 1965). This ecumenical council, without doubt, ranks as the most important ecclesial event of the twentieth century. Its effects on the Catholic Church, and indeed upon the entire Christian movement, continue to be felt today around the globe. The principles, ideals, and goals presented in the documents themselves form at least one set of criteria by which an evaluation of the effectiveness of Vatican II can be made. Other criteria of course involve the degree to which such principles have withstood the test of time, the correspondence of the Council’s expressed ideals to the current state of the Church, and the actual achievement of the goals set by the Council fathers half a century ago.

The timeliness of reviewing the documents of the Second Vatican Council has been brought home by the decision of Pope Francis, announced on 13 March 2015, to declare an extraordinary Holy Year to extend from 8 December 2015 to 20 November 2016. The inspiration for the forthcoming extraordinary Holy Year, which will be dedicated to mercy, lies in the Pontiff’s desire to mark the golden jubilee of the adjournment of the Council, which took place on the feast of the Immaculate Conception (8 December) 1965.

Even at a distance of fifty years, we are likely still too close in time to Vatican Council II to arrive at an adequate evaluation of its effectiveness. Scholars of the Council half a century from now will find themselves in a much better position to render an accurate assessment of the Council’s reception and its lasting contributions to the life of the Church. Nevertheless, on the golden jubilee of Vatican Council II, it is well worth re-reading, or, in many cases, reading for the first time the constitutions, decrees, and declarations of the largest gathering of spiritual leaders in the history of the Church. Such an investment of time and effort will enhance the fruitfulness of the coming extraordinary Holy Year marking the Council’s golden jubilee.

Many who have heard only of “the spirit” of Vatican II, whether as a justification of or as a challenge to current Church practice, lack even a nodding acquaintance or a superficial knowledge of what the documents of the Council actually state. Fifty years of bifurcated thinking have led others who actually did read the documents to conclude, erroneously, that despite what the Council formally taught, subsequent “pastoral” policies, decisions, and applications supersede any doctrinal positions framed by these magisterial texts.

Everyone, though, owes the Council, the Church, and themselves a fresh reading of the sixteen documents of Vatican II, especially now that we have reached the half-century milestone. For some, such a review will serve as a startling eye-opener; for others, an examination of conscience; for still others, a beacon continuing to guide the Bark of Peter toward her ultimate destiny: the full communion of all the saints in the very heart of the Triune God.

The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II: Four Constitutions, Nine Decrees, and Three Declarations

In keeping with the expressed wish of Pope St John XXIII (reigned 1958-1963), and in contrast with all previous
ecumenical councils, the Second Vatican Council issued no condemnations, no anathemata or excommunications. Its official teachings, though, took three distinct forms: constitutions, decrees, and declarations. The Council promulgated four constitutions: one on the sacred liturgy (Sacrosanctum concilium, 4 December 1963); two “doctrinal” constitutions, the first on the Church (Lumen gentium, 21 November 1964), the other on divine revelation (Dei Verbum, 18 November 1965); and, on the day before the conclusion of the Council, a “pastoral” constitution on the Church in the modern world (Gaudium et spes, 7 December 1965). As may be expected, the “dogmatic” constitutions Lumen gentium and Dei Verbum are the most clearly and carefully phrased of the constitutions. Gaudium et spes, in keeping with its incipit, strikes a joyous and hopeful note as it inaugurates an optimistic dialogue with secular post-modernity. In treating the sacred liturgy, Sacrosanctum concilium uses terminology and nomenclature steeped in biblical, ecclesial, and theological imagery. Nevertheless the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, although composed by liturgical scholars and professional churchmen, is readily accessible to general readers. High schoolers and university students, therefore, should be encouraged to study this Constitution with attention. Their careful reading of this pivotal text will furnish them an authoritative lens through which to view the current state of the Church’s public worship.

In addition to the four constitutions, the Council issued nine decrees and three declarations. The decrees treated the following topics: 1) social communications (Inter mirifica, 4 December 1963), 2) Catholic Eastern churches (Orientalium ecclesiarum, 21 November 1964), 3) ecumenism (Unitatis redintegratio, 21 November, 1964), 4) the pastoral office of bishops in the Church (Christus Dominus, 28 October 1965), 5) the updating and renewal of religious life (Perfectae caritatis, 1965), 6) the education and training of priests (Optatam totius, 28 October 1965), 7) the apostolate of the laity (Apostolicam actuositatem, 18 November), 8) the Church’s missionary activity (Ad gentes divinitus, 7 December 1965), and finally 9) the ministry and life of priests (Presbyterorum ordinis, 7 December 1965).

The three declarations of Vatican II dealt with Christian education (Gravissimum educationis, 28 October, 1965), the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions (Nostra aetate, 28 October 1965), and religious freedom (Dignitatis humanae, 7 December, 1965).

Over the course of this golden jubilee of Vatican II, and in preparation for the extraordinary Holy Year 2015-2016, The Rambler will consider the four constitutions of Vatican II, in chronological order. Since the Church had been offering liturgical worship since her birth, and because her official prayer had been well-established, the Council fathers considered

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**Key Documents on the Liturgy from Vatican II to Today**

**Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy**
*Sacrosanctum concilium*, 04 Dec 1964

**Five instructions on the correct implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy:**
- *Inter oecumenici*, 26 Sept 1964
- *Tres abhinc annos*, 04 May 1967
- *Liturgiae instaurationes*, 05 Sept 1970
- *Varietates legitimae* (Inculturation and the Roman Liturgy), 29 Mar 1994
- *Liturgiam authenticam* (Vernacular and the Roman Liturgy), 28 Mar 2001

*On certain questions regarding the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priests*, 15 Aug 1997

**Instruction Redemptionis sacramentum**
(Matters to be implemented and avoided), 25 Mar 2004

**Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani** - Latin edition: Vatican website: www.vatican.va


USCCB Committee on Liturgy website: [www.nccbuscc.org/liturgy](http://www.nccbuscc.org/liturgy)
the sacred liturgy to be a fitting and rather secure starting point for deliberation. In retrospect, some may now regard this view as naïve. Nevertheless, it is true that the Church knew intimately the nature of the sacred liturgy and its importance for the life and mission of Christ’s mystical body in the world. Moreover, since the 1830s, a movement, or more accurately various movements, advocating a deeper understanding of the sacred liturgy and calling for a renewal of the Church’s official prayer had gained such widespread influence that Catholics the world over recognized the need to attend to the state of divine worship so as to invigorate the Church at her very core.

Hence the Council fathers elucidated in the first constitution of the ecumenical synod the principles of liturgical practice, together with the ideals that were to guide the reform of the liturgy of the Roman rite as codified shortly after the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Note that the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962 took place just within four hundred years of the close of the Tridentine Council (1563). Trent, which dissolved not by design, but rather owing to the outbreak of the wars of religion that plagued the sixteenth century, left it to the Holy See to publish the official liturgical books to be used thereafter by Roman-rite clergy, religious, and lay faithful. Accordingly, St Pius V promulgated the revised Roman Breviary in 1568 and the revised Roman Missal in 1570. Gregory XIII issued the Roman Martyrology in 1584. Clement VIII published the Roman Pontifical in 1596 and the Ceremonial of Bishops in 1600. Finally in 1614, Paul V approved the Roman Ritual as a model for local churches in administering sacraments and sacramentals, in bestowing blessings peculiar to various regions and dioceses, and in conducting processions and ceremonies in accordance with long-standing particular customs and popular piety.

Vatican II aimed to set out liturgical principles, and made recommendations on the reform of the official liturgical books of the Roman Rite. This work of reforming the liturgical books, by the way, reached completion only in the year 2005 with the revised and expanded version of the Roman Martyrology. Naturally, such books will be updated in the future according to the needs of the Church and the organic development of her sacred liturgy.

No review of course can substitute for the actual reading of a primary document. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy deserves a careful reading, and will amply repay re-reading. Such close study of this influential text will invest the reader with an authority utterly lacking to those who have never read the documents of Vatican II, yet who pontificate blithely on liturgical and other matters, citing merely “the spirit” of the Council to justify their unfounded allegations and to further their own, often misguided, agenda.

**The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum concilium**

Vatican II’s liturgical constitution, henceforth indicated by the initials SC (an abbreviated form of its Latin incipit Sacrosanctum concilium), over the course of seven chapters presents: the general principles for the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy (5-46), treats at length the holy Eucharist (47-57) and the other sacraments as well as the sacramentals (59-82), expounds on the liturgy of the hours or divine office (83-101), then addresses challenges relating to the revision of the liturgical calendar (102-111), gives directions for the renewal of sacred music (112-121), and offers guidance concerning sacred art and sacred furnishings (122-130). It is worth pointing out from the beginning of our study that the qualifying term “sacred” is used throughout the Constitution, even in the titles of its sections. At no point does the Constitution disparage the term “sacred” or urge a secularization of sacred persons, places, or things. This designation, quite to the contrary, serves to remind all that the liturgical prayer of the Church always retains its sacred character, in spite of the best efforts of those opposed to any “setting apart” of space, speech, song, and script for the exclusive use of divine worship. Nor does SC demand the destruction of beautiful church-es, altars, furnishings, and vestments in favor of a cult of ugliness, cacophony, or decadence.

A guiding principle at work in this essay is the use of what Joseph Ratzinger, later Benedict XVI, called a hermeneutic (or interpretive key) of continuity rather than a hermeneutic of rupture or disjunction. Like all councils, Vatican II stands in a long tradition of gatherings of the Church’s leadership in an exercise of magisterial authority aimed at clarifying, preserving, defending, and proclaiming what the Church has received through tradition and scripture from her Lord. The Magisterium of the Church, then, is the servant of the depositum fidei (deposit of the Faith), not its master.[1] As one authoritative expression of the Church’s faith entrusted to her by Jesus Christ, the sacred liturgy stands as a privileged point of reference (a locus classicus) for the authentic faith handed down from the Apostles to the present generation.

In accordance with the hermeneutic of continuity just cited, readers are encouraged to peruse SC in the light of two earlier papal documents on the sacred liturgy: the motu proprio of Pope St Pius X, *Tra le sollecitudine* (22 November 1903) and the encyclical letter of Pope Pius XII *Mediator Dei* (1 November 1947). Sacrosanctum concilium builds organically on both works, broadening their scope, and applying their insights with discretion and wisdom.[2] Readers do well to recall that Vatican II issued SC in 1963, just one year after the 1962 edition of the Roman Missal appeared in print. This edition of the Missal constitutes the text approved by Pope St John Paul II.
The Sacred Liturgy

(reigned 1978-2005) and Pope Benedict XVI (reigned 2005-2013) for the “extraordinary use” of the Roman-rite Mass. Readers therefore ought to note references in SC to liturgical formulae then in vigor and to take into account the ecclesial and historical context that gave rise to SC in the first place.

It should be borne in mind, likewise, that although the liturgical constitution called for development and improvement of the sacred liturgy, it never repudiated the liturgical books then in vigor. The fathers of Vatican II sought to improve, not to discard or to suppress, the liturgy that had come to constitute one of the most precious treasures of the Church’s rich patrimony.[3] Liturgical history, then, neither began nor ended with the Second Vatican Council. Future developments, still hidden from our eyes, necessarily await the sacred liturgy, since the liturgy, like the Church herself, remains a living organism subject to growth and organic development.

What is the Sacred Liturgy? How Important is It?

The liturgical constitution SC presents the sacred liturgy as divine worship that glorifies God and sanctifies mortals by means of Christ’s paschal mystery. In other words, by the sacred liturgy the Church’s members offer to God their prayers of adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication in union with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on Calvary. God the Father accepted the sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, and indicated His approval of this sacrifice by raising Jesus from the dead and by according Him the rank of supreme favor at His right hand in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The source of the Church’s liturgy is the very heart of Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, “For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth ‘the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church’[4]” (SC 5). If the Church is the body of Christ in the world, then its soul or life-principle is the Holy Spirit, the uncreated Love breathed eternally between God and His infinitely perfect Self-Expression or Icon, the Word (Logos).

In Genesis God “formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.”[5] God then took a rib from the side of Adam and from it fashioned a woman,[6] Christ, the second Adam, in expiring on the cross, literally breathed forth on the Church, his bride, this divine Breath (the Holy Spirit). The Church for her part returns that divine breath in prayers and chants inspired by the very Love of God. In the divine office or liturgy of the hours, Christ’s mystical body the Church breathes her prayers and praises to the triune God.

From the pierced side of the second Adam, Christ, flowed water and blood,[7] the source of the Church’s sacramental life. This life wells up from the water of baptism and the tears of penance, culminating in the Blood of Christ made present in the Holy Eucharist. Between baptism and the Eucharist the whole range of the Church’s sacramental life is found. Hence the Church traces her very vitality to Christ’s emission of divine breath on the cross and to the tide of sacramental life flowing from his side. The Church’s liturgy, or public prayer, then, consists of the liturgy of the hours and the sacraments culminating in the Holy Eucharist. In this way the sacred liturgy arises from Christ’s own breath (divine office) and from his life-blood (sacraments), both of which Christ surrendered to the Father in his paschal mystery or his passing over from life to death to newness of glorified life.

Christ, who is “always present to his Church … always associates the Church with himself in this great work in which God is glorified and men are sanctified” (SC 7). Christ plays a pivotal role, as sole Mediator, between the Church and God the Father. The Church, as the bride and body of Christ, enjoys an intimate and integral connection to Christ her Bridegroom and Head. Consequently the Church offers, through Christ, worship to the eternal Father. Indeed Christ’s unique mediatorship is best understood as a distinctly priestly role whereby he presents the Church’s worship to God and bestows God’s blessing on the Church. “The liturgy, then, is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ” (SC 7). Precisely on this account, namely, that the liturgy is an action of Christ the Highpriest and of His mystical body the Church, “every liturgical celebration… is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree” (SC 7).

Excellence of the Sacred Liturgy

Such a daunting claim deserves clarification and further consideration. The divine office, as the breath of Christ’s mystical body, and the sacraments as that body’s lifeblood culminating in the Holy Eucharist, excel in nature and degree all other actions of the Church. Other prayers, devotions, spiritual exercises, however worthy of veneration and regard, do not enjoy the same status as the sacred liturgy. The sacred liturgy, as the Church’s official public prayer, even when prayed privately, outranks in stature every other form of non-liturgical prayer, even when such a devotion is exercised in common, as for example in a parish celebration of the Stations of the Cross on a Friday in Lent or the recitation of the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin in a rally or a sodality meeting. The Mass offered by a missionary in a remote religious outpost or by a retired priest in a private chapel retains its authentic liturgical character, and hence its power or efficacy, regardless of the number of faithful in attendance. Conversely, even well-attended paraliturgical practices, such as Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, however solemnly celebrated, fail to exert
the same efficacy as the Mass or the Hours. Sunday Vespers, therefore always constitutes the Church’s official evening prayer on the Lord’s Day, whether or not Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament follows that rite. More of paraliturgical devotions and pious practices below.

The Earthly Liturgy: Mirror of the Heavenly Liturgy

The excellent nature of the sacred liturgy logically demands careful attention in both its preparation and its practice. Indeed the Constitution sets a high standard for all responsible for the planning and celebration of each liturgical observance. For the liturgy is designed to mirror on earth the liturgy in heaven as offered by Jesus Christ, surrounded by the angels and saints: “In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, Minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle (cf. Rev 21:2; Col 3:1; Heb 8:2)” (SC 8). This description constitutes a daunting examination of conscience to celebrants and ministers of the sacred liturgy. They may well ask themselves whether the congregations at their liturgical celebrations have tasted the heavenly liturgy in the earthly parallel offered by them.

The very fact that a heavenly or cosmic liturgy even exists may surprise Catholics today. Yet scripture refers to the liturgy of heaven. Isaiah, for instance, perceived his prophetic vocation in a vision that found him in the midst of the court of heaven, with the seraphim circling the throne of God and chanting. “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Is 6:3). Catholics conversant with the eucharistic liturgy will recognize in this heavenly hymn the acclamation sung between the Preface and the Eucharistic Prayer or Canon missae. The Apocalypse of John likewise bears witness to an elaborate worship of God enthroned and surrounded by a variety of living beings ceaselessly singing the Tersanctus: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (Rev. 4:8). Much of the Apocalypse, or Revelation, professes to be an unveiling of the liturgy endlessly being offered in heaven. Of all the books of canonical scripture, the Epistle to the Hebrews elaborates most emphatically on the highpriesthood of Jesus Christ and the exercise of his ministry before the throne of God the Father. Christ’s heavenly ministry consists chiefly in presenting to the Father before the court of heaven the five wounds impressed on his human body in the passion and visible still on his glorified body in heaven.

The liturgical constitution, then, presents the earthly liturgy as a participation here and now in the liturgy of heaven: “With all the warriors of the heavenly army we sing a hymn of glory to the Lord; venerating the memory of the saints, we hope for some part and fellowship with them; we eagerly await the Saviour, Our Lord Jesus Christ, until he our life shall appear and we too will appear with him in glory.” (SC 8) Once priests, deacons, and other ministers of the altar grasp this fundamental concept, then the quality of the liturgy, in terms of its careful preparation, the accompaniment of appropriate music, and the cultivation of a clean, dignified, and distinctly sacred milieu, will improve. Without such a vision, the liturgy remains flat, horizontal, and centered on the immanent rather than on the transcendent. When the liturgy is reduced to a celebration of the community’s self-reflection or self-affirmation, or even when presented as a didactic exercise for the instruction of the lay faithful and visitors, it fails to achieve its raison d’être: the glory of God. The liturgy furthermore will lose none of its eschatological power as an expression of longing for the coming of Christ in that divine glory which is his as the Second Person of the Trinity.

Summit and Source of the Church’s Life and Activity

So essential is the sacred liturgy to the vitality of the Church that SC 10 describes it as “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows” [emphasis added]. The Eucharist forms, by way of analogy, the hub of the sacramental system, for it remains the first purpose and final aim of the other sacraments. Baptism admits believers to the worshipping community of the Church. Penance restores to Communion those who have sinned gravely. Confirmation raises the baptized to the status of witnesses to Christ and conforms the baptized more perfectly to Christ. Anointing of the sick strengthens the ill and infirm, preparing them for admission to the heavenly liturgy. The rites of ordination (holy orders) provide priests and other sacred ministers for the perpetuation of the Church’s sacramental life, especially the Eucharist. Matrimony seals, by means of an enduring covenant, the love of a man and a woman, thereby mirroring Christ’s own self-giving love for the Church and the Bride’s own self-surrender to her divine Spouse. For this reason, the crucifix, as the image of Christ’s sacramental sacrifice and sacrificial sacrament, hangs over the marriage bed. All the sacraments, then, derive their purpose from the Eucharist and admit the faithful to a worthy and more fruitful reception of eucharistic Communion.

The Constitution, recognizing the immense richness of the sacred liturgy, expressly discourages a minimalist approach to the rites and ceremonies of the Church. Laziness and the lack of zeal result in a mentality concerned only with providing the absolute minimum in terms of ensuring just the validity and licit, or lawfulness of the liturgy: “Pastors of souls must, therefore, realize that, when the liturgy is celebrat-
ed, something more is required than the laws governing valid and lawful celebration. It is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite and enriched by it” (SC 11). Since the emergence of the liturgical movements in the nineteenth century, hand-held missals and devotional manuals had provided liturgical texts juxtaposed with accurate vernacular translations. In many cases, as with the Schott missals in Germany and the Saint Andrew’s Daily Missal in anglophone countries, the liturgical texts of the Mass and their translations were augmented with insightful liturgical and pastoral notes.

The Role of Devotions and Popular Piety in Catholic Life

Finally, because participation in liturgical prayer scarcely exhausts the spiritual life of Christians, the Constitution praises other forms of communal prayer as well as private, individual prayer (SC 12). In respect of popular devotions, the Constitution recognizes the dignity of these expressions of piety. The Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Stations of the Cross readily come to mind. Novenas, litanies, various chaplets, and other spiritual exercises likewise fall into the category of such practices of piety. The Constitution instructs that “such devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some way derived from it, and lead the people to it, since in fact the liturgy by its very nature is far superior to any of them” (SC 13).

The Marian Rosary fits this description to an excellent degree. The one-hundred-and-fifty Aves or Hail Marys correspond to the number of Psalms in the Bible. The division of each chaplet into five decades matches the number of psalms formerly prayed at Lauds and Vespers in the divine office. (The number of psalms and canticles was reduced to three in the reformed Breviary.) In some countries and religious settings the Rosary begins, like the Breviary, with the verse/ response alternation, “Lord, open my lips / And my mouth shall announce thy praise / Incline unto my aid, O God/ O Lord, make haste to help me.” Since the days of St Louis de Montfort (1673-1716), the Gloria Patri (Glory be to the Father) has followed each decade of the Rosary in a manner similar to the same lesser doxology following each psalm in the Hours. Just as Vespers, when chanted in public on Sundays, ends with the seasonal Marian antiphon or anthem, most often the Salve Regina, so each five-decade chaplet of the Rosary concludes with the Salve Regina or Hail Holy Queen and a collect. Sometimes called the Marian Psalter or the Psalter of the Poor, the Rosary serves as a paraliturgical devotion clearly based on the liturgy of the hours. Its promotion by many popes and countless spiritual writers, including doctors of the Church, testify to the Church’s high regard for this popular prayer.

Key Criterion for Liturgical Renewal: Full, Conscious, and Active Participation of the Faithful

The term “liturgy” derives from the Greek word leitourgía, meaning “a public work” or “the people’s work.” Accordingly, once admitted to the Church as a community of faith and of worship, the baptized have a right and indeed a duty to be involved personally in the Church’s official public prayer. After all, in the words of St Peter, they constitute “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”[8] In order, then, to encourage “full, conscious, and active participation” in the sacred liturgy, the Constitution calls for a “restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy” (SC 14).

Obviously, such ongoing formation in liturgical practice can take root among the lay faithful, especially in families, only if the clergy themselves are deeply immersed in the liturgical life. After all, one cannot give what one does not have. Hence the Church must prepare priests, deacons, and religious eager to communicate effectively an appreciative understanding of the sacred liturgy and to make it a central thrust of their pastoral activity.

Liturgical Formation of the Clergy and Religious

To this end, priests and future priests (seminarians and novices in religious formation) are to become “fully imbued with the spirit and power of the liturgy” (SC 14). The “liturgical training” of future clergy is to be carried out by faculty who themselves are qualified by properly accredited and recognized liturgical institutes (SC 15). Not only is the liturgical formation of the clergy to be given paramount importance, but “in theological faculties it is to rank among the principal courses” (SC 15). Theological faculties must ask themselves, fifty years after the close of the Second Vatican Council, whether central importance has been really accorded to the study of the sacred liturgy. In many theological faculties, liturgy still ranks merely as another of the “allied sciences” after scripture studies, systematic theology, moral theology, and even canon law. Certainly the Constitution insists that the liturgy “is to be taught under its theological, historical, pastoral, and juridical aspects” (SC 15); yet it likewise mandates that “those who teach other subjects, especially dogmatic theology, sacred scripture, spiritual and pastoral theology, should … expound the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation in a manner that will clearly set forth the connection between their subjects and the liturgy, and the unity which underlies all priestly training” (SC 16).

What clearly emerges here, once again, is the centrality of the sacred liturgy to all Catholic life, but especially to the priestly life. The Constitution exhorts those in charge of the education and spiritual formation of priests to ground their
changes in a deep understanding of the nature and the importance of the liturgy for the life of the Church. Nevertheless, many priests and bishops today, even the most zealous, complain that their exposure to the study of the sacred liturgy in their seminary years was superficial, deficient, or even flawed. Readers ought to ask any priest of their acquaintance about the formation that he received in his seminary, and whether liturgical formation took the central place in the curriculum of studies as described in SC 14-18.

Given that the sacred liturgy of the Roman Rite had experience nearly two millennia of organic development by 1962, it is not surprising that a council dedicated to the renewal of the Church should turn its attention to the renewal of the Church’s official prayer. The liturgical movement or movements that preceded Vatican II by over a century had called for a re-examination, renewal, and reform of the liturgy. Even popes, like Pius X and Pius XII, had recognized the need for liturgical reform. Pius X, for instance, had reformed the Roman Breviary, and Pius XII had restored the rites of Holy Week and the Paschal Triduum. The Council, therefore, set out general norms for the liturgical reform that would ensue after its conclusion.

Three basic principles were to guide liturgical renewal. First, the authority of the Apostolic See and, where permitted, the local bishop, was to supervise the regulation of the sacred liturgy. In other words, the reform of the sacred liturgy was not to be left to private or group interests independent of ecclesiastical authority. Second, limited liturgical regulation could be exercised by various episcopal conferences. Third, and this norm is worthy of direct quotation, “no other person, not even a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority” (SC 22).

It must be admitted that in some places liturgical experimentation after the Council went unchecked for several decades, leading to confusion among many of the lay faithful and to conflict between, on the one hand, clergy who favored the shedding of liturgical laws and, on the other, those committed to upholding the traditional principles of organic liturgical development. In fact, the Constitution warns against “innovations,” and cautions that “care must be taken that any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already existing” (SC 23).

**Organic Development of the Sacred Liturgy**

Organic development is easily understood by comparison with an acorn. This tiny entity, the acorn, contains within itself all that it will become as a towering oak tree. The root system, the majestic trunk, and long-ranging branches with their myriad leaves: all these are contained within the little acorn. As the years and decades roll along, so too will these features of the oak tree unfold. All will have developed organically from the single acorn. By contrast a sign, itself made of oak, might be nailed or otherwise fastened to the oak tree seven years into its growth. Such an addition, however firmly attached to the tree, will never constitute an organic part of the oak. It remains at best a synthetic development, or, perhaps more justly, a plain eyesore.

The sacred liturgy, like the acorn, has been developing organically throughout the Church’s life. Synthetic additions, having no part in the nature of the liturgy, cannot be recognized or admitted as “organic” developments. They must, therefore, be curbed or disallowed altogether. The Constitution consequently calls for a reform of the sacred liturgy in keeping with its nature and its organic development.

**Reform of Liturgical Books**

In the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent called for a reform of the liturgical books of the Roman rite. Similarly, Vatican II mandated four centuries later a reform of these liturgical books. Sources and resources not available to scholars of the liturgy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were to inform the twentieth-century reform. Competent scholars appointed by ecclesiastical authorities were to strive to ensure that “in liturgical celebrations each person, minister, or layman who has an office to perform, should carry out all and only those parts which pertain to his office by the nature of the rite and the norms of the liturgy” (SC 28).

Moreover, the Council’s insistence that “servers, readers, commentators, and members of the choir also exercise a genuine liturgical function” (SC 29) meant that liturgical books be made available so as to facilitate such participation in sacred ministry. This directive meant, in practical terms, that the various components of books like the Roman Missal ought to be published as separate but complementary books. Hence readers were to read from a lectionary, deacons to proclaim the Gospel from an Evangeliary, cantors, scholae, and choirs to chant antiphons and acclamations from a Gradual (from the Latin word *gradus* or “step,” where such musical texts were sung), and priests to pray from Sacramentaries. Members of the lay faithful likewise were to have access to the texts of acclamations prepared for them and arranged in a convenient format in order to encourage and enhance congregational participation in liturgical rites. Such handbooks, called Missals, should indicate the actions, gestures, and postures to be assumed by congregants.

The Constitution mentions, significantly, that “at the proper time a reverent silence should be observed” (SC 30). Many centuries before 1963, periods of silent prayer had been
Built into the Mass. The Canon, or Eucharistic Prayer, for instance, had been prayed by the priest in silence. So too had the Offertory prayers, including the Secret (Prayer over the Offerings), been recited silently by the priest. The fathers of the Council, then, were long since steeped in the mystical role of silence in the Mass. One of the most egregious casualties of the post-Vatican II liturgical reform has been silence, the mother of inspiration, of poetry, and of prayer. It is worth recalling here, then, that the Constitution’s call for the increased and enhanced participation of the lay faithful in no way demands the eradication of silence and the filling of every pause in the Mass with some noise, whether it take the form of music, recited text, or commentary.

Norms arising from the Educative and Pastoral Nature of the Liturgy

Although the primary aim of the sacred liturgy remains the worship of God, the rites nevertheless teach participants about the Christian faith. In this respect, sacred ceremonies express the depositum fidei entrusted to the Church by Christ. Accordingly the Constitution calls for clarity in the reform of the liturgy. Among the general norms to be observed in the reform of the rites, the Constitution cites, as a primary desideratum “a noble simplicity”: “They should be short, clear, and free from useless repetitions. They should be within the people’s powers of comprehension and normally should not require much explanation” (SC 34). Readers familiar with the novus ordo Missae will have noted a more austere or jejune format in the order of service when compared with the rite of Mass in the 1962 Roman Missal. The Confiteor, for instance, has been shorn of individual saints, and, when selected as an option for a given Mass, is recited by priest, ministers, and congregation all together, and only once. Although the Agnus Dei retains its triple formula, the last phrase ending with the plea dona nobis pacem, the Domine non sum dignus (Lord I am not worthy) is recited only once, again all together by priest, ministers, and congregation.

At a distance of fifty years it is worth considering more recent objections concerning an excessive rationalism at work in the revised liturgy. After all, the liturgy itself operates, like sacred scripture, on various levels of sense or meaning beyond the literal, including the allegorical, the moral, and the eschatological. A meaning deeper than simply the literal or “obvious” may well be at work too in some of the Mass texts. Furthermore, scriptural echoes may penetrate the conscious or subconscious levels of participants when they are reinforced by repetition. Hence it behooves readers who have access to a celebration of the usus antiquior or Tridentine use of the Roman-rite Mass to experience for themselves the effects of this particular norm. Rationalism alone can scarcely be allowed to serve as the final criterion for judging the value of texts steeped in mystical and spiritual meaning.

The Constitution urges the restoration of “a more ample, more varied, and more suitable reading from sacred scripture” (SC 35, see also SC 51). Certainly this desideratum has been fulfilled by the introduction in 1970 of a three-year lectionary cycle for Sundays and a two-year lectionary cycle for weekdays. Moreover, the season of Advent now has a series of scriptural readings assigned for each day, thereby matching the season of Lent. Nevertheless it remains the case that the rite known as the “ordinary of the Mass” in the 1962 Roman Missal is replete with far more scriptural allusions and echoes than the order of Mass in the 1970 Roman Missal.

The ministry of preaching is to be exercised in such a way that a homily, rather than a sermon, is to provide instruction for the congregation, drawing its content mainly from the readings, the prayer formulae, and the character of the feast or season in which the rite takes place. The Constitution also encourages celebrants to provide short directives to congregants, though “only at suitable moments and in prescribed words or their equivalent” (SC 35, see also SC 52). The experience of some readers may suggest that whatever trimming the liturgy underwent according to paragraph 34, it recovered with double interest by the implementation of paragraph 35 in encouraging extempore explanations of rites and ceremonies on the part of celebrants, particularly when in the vicinity of a microphone.

The Language of Worship

The most obvious change in the liturgy associated with the Second Vatican Council has to do with the widespread adoption of the vernacular and the virtual disappearance of Latin in the celebration of Mass. The last two decades, it must be acknowledged, have seen the reemergence in many places of some Latin texts in parishes and chaplaincies. Rome and various international pilgrimage sites, like Lourdes and Fatima, have retained the use of Latin for the benefit of the wide range of pilgrims coming from around the world. The widespread loss of Latin in the Roman-rite Mass, however, cannot be blamed on Sacrosanctum concilium. Paragraph 36 clearly indicates that “the use of the Latin language, with due respect to particular law, is to be preserved in the Latin rites.” Non-Roman Latin rites include the Milanese (Ambrosian) and the Old Hispanic (so-called Mozarabic), both of which are confined to specific jurisdictions. Mass in these Latin rites, too, now may be offered in the vernacular, as well as in Latin.

The Constitution leaves it to competent territorial ecclesiastical authorities to determine whether and to what extent the vernacular language is to be used. Vernacular translations of the Latin-rite books are subject to the competent ecclesiastical
cal authorities, with the Apostolic See exercising supreme jurisdiction in liturgical matters (SC 40). Limitations of space forbid further comment here except to point out that it took over forty years and considerable efforts on the part of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments before an accurate English translation of the Roman Missal was made available to Roman-rite Catholics.

Local Adaptations of the Sacred Liturgy

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy encourages the circumspect adaptation of liturgical rites when revising the liturgical books, thereby granting legitimate variations to specific groups, regions, and peoples, particularly in mission lands (SC 38). The Constitution likewise urges the establishment of local liturgical commissions under the competent ecclesiastical authorities and guided by “experts in liturgical science, sacred music, art, and pastoral practice” (SC 44). Adaptation of the sacred liturgy gave rise to a limited amount of experimentation to be monitored by the Holy See. Finally, the Constitution calls for the creation of diocesan commissions for sacred music and sacred art, which are to work “in the closest collaboration” with the Commission on the Sacred Liturgy (SC 46).

Decrees for the Holy Eucharist

The Constitution decrees that various elements of the rite of Mass be simplified, “due care being taken to preserve their substance” (SC 50). Such simplification involves, for example, the omission of duplications and accretions. On the other hand, “other parts which suffered loss through accidents of history are to be restored to the vigor they had in the days of the holy Fathers, as may seem useful or necessary” (SC 50). One such element destined for restoration was the “bidding prayers,” better known as the “general intercessions” or “prayer of the faithful,” which would include intercessions for the Church, civil authorities, and specific needs for local churches (SC 53).

Here the Constitution shows a clear preference for patristic developments, whereas it holds medieval developments in decidedly less esteem. It should be pointed out, though, that the organic development of the liturgy scarcely ended with the fifth or sixth centuries, and that at least in the west developments in the sacred liturgy, such as the elevations of the Host and Chalice, as well as the institution of the feast and office of Corpus Christi, reflected the influence of authentical theological developments surrounding the real, true, and substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the manner of that presence. Current trends in theological and liturgical circles, including academic faculties, likewise reflect a bias in favor of patristic over medieval studies. At some point this imbalance must be addressed if liturgiologists are to avoid charges of antiquarianism and a romantic attachment to a specific period of history. Authentic organic development implies continued growth over the ages up to and including the present. The vaunting of one historical period over all others risks inhibiting legitimate appreciation of eras less known, or poorly represented, in liturgical studies. Such an approach skews, or even impedes, the organic development itself of the sacred liturgy.

As mentioned earlier, the Constitution encouraged the use of vernacular languages in the Mass, particularly in the proclamation of the scripture readings in the Liturgy of the Word and in the Prayer of the Faithful. Nevertheless SC 54 insists that “care must be taken to ensure that the faithful may also be able to say or sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them.” Clearly, then, the Constitution in no sense abolished the use of Latin in the eucharistic liturgy. Indeed it presumes that congregations will have been so well exposed to Latin in the Mass that they will be able to sing their respective parts in responses and acclamations.

Without prejudice to the teachings of the Council of Trent on the reality and manner of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, including the principle of concomitance by which Christ remains really, truly, and substantially present, whole and entire, under each perceptible particle of the consecrated Host and each perceptible drop of the precious Blood in the Chalice, the Constitution permits local bishops to allow the distribution of Holy Communion, even to the laity, under both species (SC 55). Note that the Constitution does not mandate the distribution of Communion under both kinds as a general norm to be observed in each celebration of Mass, nor does it specify precisely how Communion is to be distributed under both species. Traditional practice has witnessed the emergence of three distinct ways of receiving Communion under both kinds: by intinction, by direct access to the Chalice, and by means of a fistula or metal straw.

The Constitution upholds the ancient practice of concelebration, which in the Latin West had become restricted to the ordination Mass of a priest or bishop in which the newly ordained concelebrated the Mass with the ordaining prelate and fellow priests or bishops. The Constitution extends its use particularly on Maundy Thursday, both for the Mass of Chrism and for the Mass of the Lord’s Supper; at Masses during councils, synods, and conferences of bishops, as well as gatherings of priests; at the conventual Mass in religious houses and at the principal Mass in churches (SC 57). The Constitution leaves local bishops to regulate the discipline of concelebration within their own dioceses. Since shortly after the rite for concelebration was drawn up at the bidding of the Constitution (SC...
The practice of concelebration has become generally accepted throughout the Church. Nevertheless, the Constitution guarantees the right of each priest to celebrate Mass individually with the exception of the Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Maundy Thursday: “Each priest shall always retain his right to celebrate Mass individually, though not at the same time in the same church as a concelebrated Mass nor on the Thursday of the Lord’s Supper” (SC 57).

Sacraments and Sacramentals

In addressing the sacraments other than the Holy Eucharist, the Constitution mandates the revival of the ancient catechumenate for adults (SC 64). The adult catechumenate had lapsed virtually throughout most of the Church except in mission stations. Instruction is to be accompanied by various prayers, blessings, exorcisms, and anointing administered at successive intervals of time, particularly over the course of Lent, the season specially dedicated to the preparation of adults for the sacraments of Christian initiation. Prospective converts of adult age had hitherto taken instructions individually or in a group setting, but their baptism or reception into the Church was a quiet, almost private affair. A revised catechumenate would restore the public and properly ecclesial character of the admission of adults to baptism, confirmation, and finally the Eucharist all within a single event. Since late antiquity and throughout the middle ages the western Church had witnessed a disintegration of the sacraments of initiation. The Council mandated their reintegration in a single ceremony. Such a restoration would strengthen both the neophytes and the rest of the Church who prayed for them and otherwise supported them on their spiritual pilgrimage to full initiation into the mystical Body of Christ.

The rite for the baptism of infants likewise was to undergo revision (SC 67-68). This rite, drawn from the medieval rite for baptizing a sick catechumen, was minimalist and brief, lasting usually twenty minutes or less. The new rite for the baptism of infants was to direct questions and elements of dialogue to the godparents or sponsors and parents of the baby, rather than directly to the infant, as was the case in the older rite in vigor in 1962. A choice of readings from Sacred Scripture, arranged as a liturgy of the Word, would expose adults involved in the rite to a clear understanding of the nature and purpose of baptism. The Constitution also decreed the revision of the rite for supplying what was omitted in the baptism of an infant (SC 69). This rite would then reflect the fact that the infant indeed had been baptized, and therefore it would omit the various exorcisms of a catechumen as well as references to an imminent baptism. A new rite was to be instituted for the admission of previously baptized converts into full communion with the Church (SC 69).

In order to manifest more clearly the nature and purpose of the post-baptismal Gift of the Holy Spirit, the Constitution commissioned a new rite of confirmation (SC 71). The renewal of baptismal promises before the actual conferral of the Holy Spirit was but one way that “the intimate connection of this sacrament with the whole of Christian initiation may more clearly appear” (SC 71). The new rite of confirmation emerged in 1973.

The sacraments of healing, that is penance and anointing of the sick, likewise were to undergo revision in respect of their rites and formulae, again so that they might “more clearly express both the nature and effect of the sacrament” (SC 72). The Constitution clarifies that the anointing of the sick, then commonly known as “extreme unction” is not a sacrament only for those on the point of death, but for anyone of the faithful beginning to be in danger of death through sickness, old age, or infirmity (SC 73). Moreover, the Constitution mandates the preparation of a continuous rite in which the sick person “is anointed after he has made his confession and before he received Viaticum” (SC 74). Here the Constitution rectified a flawed situation that had transpired over the course of the Middle Ages whereby confession had been followed first by Viaticum and then by the final anointing. The number of anointings would be reduced to one on the forehead and on the hands (SC 75). With the restoration of the correct order of receiving “the last rites,” the Church was emphasizing the prime importance of the Holy Eucharist, and reflecting a real parallel between the order of these last rites with the rites of initiation. Hence, in both cases the forgiveness of sins leads, first, to an anointing for strengthening the soul, and, finally, to the reception of the Bread of Life.

The Constitution prescribes little alteration for the rites admitting men to holy orders or couples to the sacrament of marriage. In reference to the rites of ordination, the Constitution urges the use of the vernacular in the addresses given by the bishop before each ordination or consecration (SC 76). All bishops present at the consecration of a bishop should join the three standard co-consecrators in imposing hands (SC 76). The relatively brief rite of the exchange of spousal consent in holy matrimony was to be enhanced by a reposition after the liturgy of the Word, by greater use of the vernacular, and by the retention or admission of “other praiseworthy customs and ceremonies” drawn from local wedding customs (SC 77). Hitherto the exchange of marital vows had taken place just before the nuptial Mass. Its placement before the liturgy of the Eucharist within Mass underscored the newly married couple as an earthly icon of Christ’s union with the Church. To this end also, the profession of religious vows and the renewal of religious vows should henceforth take place within Mass, thereby highlighting the consecrated virgin as an icon of the Church wed to Christ (SC 80).
Finally the Constitution calls for a revision of the funeral rites in order to stress more effectively the paschal dimension of Christian death (SC 81). Similarly, a revision of the rite for the burial of infants, together with a Mass formulary for such an occasion, is to heighten the paschal character of these ceremonies (SC 82).

**Liturgy of the Hours**

In revising the divine office, the Constitution identifies Lauds and Vespers as “the hinges on which the daily office turns” (SC 89). Consequently, these chief hours are to be celebrated at the appropriate time of day, rather than on the day before in the case of Lauds, or in the morning of the same day in the case of Vespers, as had been the common practice in many places and by many clerics up to Vatican II. The nocturnal hour of Matins, renamed the Office of Readings, when prayed individually, could be offered at any hour of the day. The number of its psalms was to be reduced and its readings lengthened. The hour of Prime, really an echo of Lauds, was destined for suppression. Outside of choir, one of the minor hours of Terce, Sext, and None could be selected according to the most suitable time of the day. The liturgical day ends with the hour of Compline, even if prayed after midnight.

A further reduction in the *pensum* or weight of the divine office included the decision to distribute the total number of 150 psalms over the period of a month, rather than over the course of a single week. Such emendations to the Breviary were to make the praying of the liturgy of the hours less stressful and more prayerful for priests and religious engaged in active, rather than contemplative or strictly monastic, apostolates. The sanctification of time, then, through the praying of the hours was to be less monasticized than hitherto had been the case.

The Constitution directs pastors of souls to ensure “that the principal hours, especially Vespers, are celebrated in common in church on Sundays and on the more solemn feasts” (SC 100). The celebration of Vespers in parish churches on Sundays is one area where the Church was more observant before the Council than after it. Here is room for greater improvement in implementing one of the decrees of the liturgical constitution. On the other hand, it is clear that more of the lay faithful are praying the liturgy of the hours since Vatican II than before it. The Constitution strongly encourages the laity to join the voice of the Church in this form of liturgical prayer (SC 100).

**The Liturgical Year**

In treating the liturgical year, *Sacrosanctum concilium* prioritizes Sunday as the weekly observance of the Day of the Lord’s resurrection and Easter as its annual solemn celebration (SC 102). The custom of substituting the Sunday Mass formulary for that of the Virgin Mary was to yield to a decided preference in favor of the usual Sunday liturgy. Solemnities of Our Lady or particular saints that displaced the Sunday liturgy were to be reduced to a mere handful: “Other celebrations, unless they be truly of the greatest importance, shall not have precedence over Sunday, which is the foundation and kernel of the whole liturgical year” (SC 106). Accordingly, henceforth “the Proper of Time [i.e. of the Season] shall be given due precedence over the feasts of the saints so that the entire cycle of the mysteries of salvation may be suitably recalled” (SC 108).

The revised liturgical calendar would reduce the number of saints’ feasts, thereby clearing the various seasons of the year so that the minds of the faithful might become more closely attuned to the cycles of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany and Lent-Easter-Pentecost. “Lest the feasts of the saints should take precedence over the feasts which commemorate the very mysteries of salvation, many of them should be left to be celebrated by a particular Church or nation, or family of religious. Only those should be extended to the universal Church which commemorate saints who are truly of universal importance” (SC 111). Every few hundred years, the liturgical calendar is culled of saints’ feasts. Yet with new saints being recognized through canonization, spaces on the calendar soon begin to fill up. With the pontificate of St John Paul II, a greater number of saints was canonized than in all of the preceding pontificates combined. The future will tell how strongly nature abhors a vacuum even in reference to the liturgical calendar.

**Sacred Music**

The Constitution recognizes the superiority of sacred music over every other art, since it forms “a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy (SC 112).” Consequently, the Constitution decrees that “great importance is to be attached to the teaching and practice of music in seminaries, in the novitiates and houses of religious of both sexes, and also in other Catholic institutions and schools” (SC 115). It likewise encourages the establishment of higher institutes of sacred music and the genuine liturgical training of composers and singers, especially boys. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (2002), approved by St John Paul II, actually favours “singing Mass” over “singing the Mass.”

According to the Constitution, Gregorian chant still enjoys “pride of place” in liturgical services inasmuch as it is “specially suited to the Roman liturgy” (SC 116). Sacred polyphony along with other kinds of sacred music are to be admitted to liturgical services “so long as they accord with the spirit of the liturgical action” (SC 116). The Constitution
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The Sacred Liturgy

called likewise for the completion of the “typical” (officially approved) edition of the books of Gregorian chant inaugurated under St Pius X, and the preparation of an edition of chants containing simpler melodies to be used in smaller churches. A Graduate simplex did see the light of day in the decades following the Council, although the average North American parish seems innocent of its existence and relevance.

The Council had scarcely drawn to a close when plainchant rapidly gave way in many parishes to popular and “folk” music performed with various degrees of competence on a wide spectrum of instruments. Despite the Constitution’s decree that the pipe organ be held “in high esteem” in the Latin Church (SC 120), it nevertheless permits the admission of other instruments for use in divine worship, but “only on condition that the instruments are suitable, or can be made suitable, for sacred use; that they accord with the dignity of the temple, and that they truly contribute to the edification of the faithful” (SC 120). This phrasing implies that some instruments are in fact unsuitable for sacred use, do not really accord with the dignity of God’s house, and actually fail to edify the faithful. Readers may consider these criteria, and ask themselves whether, over the past half a century, any such instruments come to mind.

Finally, the Constitution decrees that “the texts intended to be sung must always be in conformity with Catholic doctrine. Indeed, they should be drawn chiefly from the sacred scripture and from liturgical sources” (SC 121). For anglophone worshipers, a close examination of conscience on this point is long overdue. Readers must honestly ask themselves how faithfully this decree has been implemented.

The decade following Vatican II witnessed the importation into the liturgy of such trite secular ditties as “Blowin’ in the Wind” and “Five Hundred Miles Away from Home,” to be followed shortly by such catchy “Catholic” confections as Ray Repp’s “Here We Are!” and Sebastian Temple’s 1967 snappy, show-stopping two-step, “The Mass is Ended, All Go in Peace!” which actually made it into Canada’s very own post-Vatican II hymnal, The Catholic Book of Worship (Ottawa: Canadian Catholic Conference, 1972). How the Calvinist “Amazing Grace” and the anti-papal The Church’s One Foundation crept into Catholic hymn collections still escapes this author. How, for example, can a Catholic who espouses the doctrine of infant baptism sing the lines “How precious did that grace appear! The hour I first believed”? In what Catholic sense can the Church founded by Christ find herself “by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed”? Satisfying Catholic interpretations of the lines just cited should be directed to the author, care of The Rambler.

Some consider the current state of music in liturgical worship to be in “crisis.” To entertainers of such a view the question must be raised: How long can a “crisis” last? In a fever, the crisis may last only a few hours at most. Either the patient recovers, or else succumbs to the fever. There is no room for shilly-shallying. After fifty years of hearing the kind of music on offer in the average local Catholic parish, it is fairly safe to say that liturgical music in self-styled “developed” countries simply has collapsed. The relatively few pockets where authentic sacred music actually thrives will play an invaluable role when the time at last comes to revive Catholic liturgical music in North America.

Sacred Art and Sacred Furnishings

The Constitution notes rather unabashedly that “the Church has, with good reason, always claimed the right to pass judgment on the arts, deciding which of the works of artists are in accordance with faith, piety, and the laws religiously handed down, and are to be considered suitable for sacred use” (SC 122). Nevertheless, the Church has not confined herself to any particular style of art: “She has admitted styles from every period, in keeping with the natural characteristics and conditions of peoples and the needs of the various rites” (SC 123). The Constitution, therefore, permits free scope to be given to contemporary art from every race and country, “provided it bring to the task the reverence and honor due to the sacred buildings and rites” (SC 123). Those responsible for enhancing the Church’s artistic repertoire are to seek “noble beauty rather than sumptuous display” (SC 124). Moreover, bishops are to remove from houses of worship and other sacred places any works of art “repugnant to faith, morals, and Christian piety, and which offend true religious sense either by depraved forms or through lack of artistic merit or because of mediocrity or pretense” (SC 124). Here, as in music, the Constitution implies that some expressions of the plastic arts simply fail either to meet artistic standards or to respect religious sensibilities.

In contrast to the iconoclasm that despoiled many a North American church building of historically significant and artistically worthy sacred images, the Constitution actually upholds the practice of displaying sacred images for veneration by the faithful (SC 125). Indeed the Constitution explicitly warns local ecclesiastical authorities to “ensure that the sacred furnishings and works of value are not disposed of or destroyed, for they are ornaments in God’s house” (125). The decrease in iconography in churches since the mid-1960s has deprived several generations of Catholics of their liturgical and spiritual patrimony. This deracination has no foundation in Sacrosanctum concilium, and will be addressed only when concerned Catholics, whether clergy or lay, decide to reverse this decades-long trend toward minimalism.
Finally, the Constitution mandates that those in training for ministerial roles in the Church be given, during their philosophical and theological studies, instruction in “the history and development of sacred art, and … the basic principles which govern the production of its works” (SC 129). The recent increase in monumental Catholic architecture, featured for instance in Duncan Stroik’s *Journal of Sacred Architecture*, testifies to a hopeful reversal of the minimalist trend just deployed in the preceding paragraph.

**Conclusion**

The liturgical constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium* remains the standard against which must be measured the effectiveness of the Church’s efforts to reform the liturgy for the new millennium. It must be admitted that, in the half-century since the close of the Council, the Apostolic See has had to release no fewer than five instructions regarding the correct implementation of this Constitution. The fifth such instruction, *Liturgiam authenticam*, issued in 2001, dealt with the authentic translation into the vernacular of the liturgical books of the Roman rite published after Vatican II.

Readers who appreciate the importance of consulting primary documents will want to peruse for themselves *Sacrosanctum concilium* in order to consider its fruits in the light of the past fifty years of liturgical renewal since Vatican II. They may also wish to consult the memoire/apologia of the figure most influential in shaping the revised liturgical rites: Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy (1948–1975)* (Liturgical Press, 1990). Also worth considering, from another perspective, is Peter Kwasniewski, *Resurgent in the Midst of Crisis. Sacred Liturgy, the Traditional Mass, and Renewal in the Church* (Angelico, 2015). ■

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**ENDNOTES**


[3] Pope Benedict XVI clarified in his apostolic letter to bishops *Con grade fiducia* on the occasion of the publication of his motu proprio *Summorum pontificum* (7 July 2007) that the Mass approved by John XXIII in the 1962 Roman Missal and that authorized by Paul VI in the 1970 Roman Missal constitute two distinct forms of the same Romanrite celebration of the Eucharist. The former is now designated as the *usus antiquior* or extraordinary form, whereas the later is termed the *usus recentior* or ordinary form.


Pope Francis, *Gaudium et spes*, and the Mission of the Church

The call to evangelize in the “peripheries” is a touchstone of the papacy of Pope Francis [1], explicated through commentaries and gestures which have expanded the breadth and depth of its possible meanings, applications, and implications. The generative extent of what it entails can only be appreciated in light of directions anticipated by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council and developed by St John Paul II. In understanding Francis, it is unhelpful to unmoor the energy and conviction behind his language from its theological context and foundation.

Before presenting the context and foundations of this call to act in the peripheries, it is helpful to consider the full quotation in which this phrase was first used by Pope Francis. Addressing fellow Cardinal-electors on the eve of the conclave, he stated: “Evangelizing presupposes a desire in the Church to come out of herself. The Church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also the existential peripheries: the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents, and of all misery.[2]” By these words, Cardinal Bergoglio did not merely reiterate a personal conviction to live in simplicity as a member of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and nor was he drawing attention to his own longstanding personal commitment to the relief of poverty and suffering in his native diocese; instead, what he presented was a vision of the simple task of evangelisation in 21st century.

For Francis, the mission of proclaiming the Good News communicated in the revelation of Christ is accomplished when Christians share that news to those in the periphreral loci of their particular contexts. Pope Francis and Pope Benedict XVI, whom some have caricatured as a defensive, ultra-traditional, distant “pontiff,” do not differ fundamentally on the importance of reaching those seemingly far from the Gospel. The unifying thread that runs through both pontificates is to be found in the question of the Church’s mission in the post-conciliar era. While there are obvious differences in emphases and tone between them, it is altogether more fruitful and interesting to consider any perceptible change in tone on the part of Pope Francis in light of the Second Vatican Council. Pope Francis, who is sometimes portrayed as radically departing from his immediate predecessor, actually completes the arc of interpretation of Vatican II, as developed by Benedict XVI, and which was shaped significantly by John Paul II.

With Pope Francis, a remarkable theme of Vatican II re-emerged with new energy: the importance of safeguarding the transcendence of the human person. This is a theme to which Karol Wojtyla had given voice both before and after his election to the papacy, and it is one that also permeates the teachings of Benedict XVI. At its core, the transcendence of...
the human person inspires a radical rendering of the Christian mission in its proper sense as one that calls the Church out of a boorishly self-referential circle, propelling it on the adventure of a faith defined as seeking the face of Christ in others. It does so with eyes wide open to the height of glory reflected in each human person in his or her unrepeatability and individuality. In his first encyclical Redemptoris hominis, John Paul II defined the Church’s mission in the world as central “to humanity – to the peoples, the nations, the succeeding generations, and every individual human being,” declaring that this mission was sustained by the person of Christ in the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection and in the Eucharist. In seeking Christ’s face, particular faces are revealed in their suffering and need, stirring up the Christian anthropological vision of an inherent human character that, paradoxically, transcends historical circumstance. The groundwork for this theological anthropology was laid at Vatican II.

In Gaudium et Spes, the Council Fathers considered the notion of the “transcendent character” of the human person and the responsibility to give it due protection.[4] According to Vatican II, the Church does not merely carry an ethical responsibility for protecting and defending the transcendent character of human life, but is herself a sign to the world of that same character. The Church’s faithful, therefore, share a burden of responsibility to seek ways in which the intrinsically transcendent character of the human person may remain visible and how it may be safeguarded and defended.

Given the status of Gaudium et Spes as one of the most significant of the Conciliar documents, it is surprising that the importance of the transcendent character of the human person has not since become a widely expressed reality in ecclesial life. It is hardly a term used regularly in parish or school life, and remains one generally referred to in the academy. Nevertheless, it has far-ranging currency in ecclesiastical life. The emphasis accorded to human dignity by John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and lately Pope Francis, can be interpreted as a corrective to the “throw-away” culture of modern times that diminishes human dignity. The protection of human transcendence, and the Church’s responsibility to safeguard what it means to be human, is needed more than ever.[5] Pope Francis has taken up this problem anew and charged it with vibrant examples of service, directing the faithful to join him in acts of mercy. It is in this context that his call of evangelization in the peripheries must be placed, where it may be referred fruitfully to the fragility of the human condition. The call of Pope Francis finds strong impetus in the words of Gaudium et Spes, where the Church is called not only to give intellectual accounts of human dignity, but to manifest within its practices an attentiveness to the human person expressed in provocative gestures of solidarity and compassion.

While John Paul II Benedict XVI were among the Council Fathers, Pope Francis, who is younger and had not been present at Vatican II, is better seen as a “son” of the Council. The Council’s legacy in the pontificate of Pope Francis exhibits itself in his interest in human dignity, the work pioneered by John Paul II and Benedict XVI, from which Francis had drawn in his appeals for a “poor Church.” The combination of the Church’s care of the poor, her need to cultivate a culture of compassion, and the urgent need of internal reform aimed at improving ethical practices are areas where the Church is called to serve humanity with unremitting generosity. It is hard to imagine a Pope Francis and his emphasis on human dignity without the groundwork of the Council and the pontificates of his predecessors. One might say also that because of the interpretative theological and philosophical work completed by John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Francis is free to focus on proclamation and incarnate gestures of mercy. That is to say, Francis does not need to focus on interpretation because that work has been done rather successfully. Rather, he is at liberty to show how the Council is to be manifest in action.

In light of this opportunity, a key phrase of Gaudium et Spes must be taken into account. In section 76, the authors introduce the distinction between the political community and the Church, a distinction which must be unequivocal: “The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system. She is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person.”[6] The language of “sign and safeguard” in the context of this statement about the political neutrality of the Church’s role and competence introduces a nuance about her nature and role in the world as regards human dignity; the transcendent character of the human person does not belong to the Church. The Church and its members do not have any monopoly over the meaning and interpretation of the transcendent character of humanity. Rather than monopolizing this meaning, the Church and its members are enjoined by Gaudium et Spes to be living “signs” of its reality, and this they are to do by attending lovingly to the nature and beauty of human dignity through the moral choices they make in their own lives.

Gaudium et spes is, admittedly, vague as to what is meant by “the transcendent character of the human person.” This vagueness is not a hindrance, but an invitation to the active role we must take in cultivating an ethical Christian imagination. To this end, Gaudium et spes offers some guidance to help frame the parameters of Christian social ethics. In sections 12 to 22, the dignity of the human person is presented in rela-
From the Council to Francis

The Human Person


John Paul II and the Gift of Self

The link in the arc of interpretation between Gaudium et spes and Pope Francis can be found in Pope John Paul II. Of particular significance to discourse on human dignity is the connection between John Paul II’s philosophical anthropology and the Eucharist.

The Eucharist was a habitual part of John Paul II Christian life. Some of his most innovative thought on human and divine love was written on his knees before the Blessed Sacrament in Krakow – a little known fact that ought to give all theologians pause for reflection. Scholars often notice John Paul II’s well-developed description of a God who gives himself as gift and who in turn gifts the human person to him or herself by way of responsible action. Little has been said, however, on the relationship between the Eucharist and the mystery of the person as it pertains to the logic of gift. In his first papal encyclical, Redemptor hominis, John Paul II brought the Church’s theological anthropology into a Christo-centric focus. In his final encyclical, Ecclesia de Eucharistia, on the relationship between the Church and the Eucharist, both of which are referred to as Christ’s body, he brought the understanding of the human person further, touching on the transcendent character of the human person.

In Ecclesia de Eucharistia, John Paul II states that the Eucharist is not just one of many gifts, but serves as the gift par excellence. [10] The encyclical is geared to providing a fundamental orientation regarding human dignity. How we view the human person differs a great deal when we consider the matter in the light of Mary, Christ and the Cross.

That is to say, the Eucharist is not simply the gift, and not only takes up the human person within a logic of the self-gift in the Incarnate Logos, but effects a re-shaping of our imagination regarding the human person. We do not just receive the other as gift, but we perceive the other as also caught up in a non-cyclical eternal, divine self-offering; the gift of the divine self. As we are caught up in the mystery of Christ’s Eucharistic presence, we also begin to view others around us in a new light, as gifts of the Trinitarian self-plenitude that graces each person as a child of the divine Father, and for whom Jesus Christ gave his life. The mystery of the cross and the gift of Holy Communion do not simply raise our eyes heavenward, but to the divine gifts of human persons to our side, behind us, and before us. Indeed, when seen in this light, the gesture of sharing the peace in the Eucharistic liturgy can be viewed with a fresh understanding of the inviolable mystery and gift of each human person.

Francis and Mercy

With charity at the heart of Christian social ethics, the Franciscan papacy has led to a series of provocative gestures which direct the Church towards a life of solidarity with those in the margins or peripheries – i.e., peripheries which are geographical and economic, as well as existential. The emphasis on gestures rather than theory represents a transition in the Church from reflective deliberation to concrete action: “To love God and neighbor is not something abstract, but profoundly concrete: it means seeing in every person and face of the Lord to be served, to serve him concretely.” [7] Over and again, Francis returns to the theme of poverty as a preparation for this possibility: “How I would like a Church which is poor and for the poor!” [8] The challenge to which Pope Francis gestures is that of meeting Christ in people whose lives are lived – economically, socially, existentially – at the margins of the Church and of their culture and society. To seek these people is to seek Christ. It is a challenge because the margins lie well beyond the limits of our zones of comfort and stretch our engrained patterns of behaviour to new limits.

Hope, for example, is a habit of thought that is born paradoxically in tending to the poor: “Poverty calls us to sow hope... Poverty is the flesh of the poor Jesus, in that child who is hungry, in the one who is sick, in those unjust social structures.” [9] Pope Francis places the transcendent character of the human person in the context of what is immanent to the human condition, the faces of those who are poor and suffering. Mercy therefore is realised in the intersection between the transcendence of God and the horizontality of human material experience. Thus, as it has always been for Christian theology, the mercy of God is shown in the incarnate dimension of the divine.
John Paul II’s Eucharistic Anthropology

In a message to the 1996 International Marian Congress in Poland, John Paul II explicitly joined the Eucharist and Mary by way of Christ’s Passion. The Congress’s theme was ‘Mary and the Eucharist,’ and John Paul prayed that Mary would lead disciples to the Eucharist. He remarked: “Every Holy Mass makes present in an unbloody manner that unique and perfect sacrifice, offered by Christ on the Cross, in which Mary participated, joined in spirit with her suffering Son, lovingly consenting to his sacrifice and offering her own sorrow to the Father (cf. Lumen gentium, 58).”[11] This reflection, given on the Feast of the Assumption, highlights the Christological centrality in John Paul’s thought that makes possible a continual thematic connection between Mary and the Eucharist. Mary is spoken of devotionally and personally in such works as Crossing the Threshold of Hope but his chief Marian documents are his Wednesday Catechism on the Virgin Mary (1995-1997), Redemptoris Mater (1987) and Rosarium Virginis Mariae (2002).[12] In the first, he produced a sustained meditation on the role of Mary in the life of faith, placing it foundationally upon the saving work of Christ in history.[13] In the second, he added specific biblical narratives to the prayers of the Rosary, named the ‘Luminous Mysteries,’ and explained the focus of its prayers as contemplating the face of Jesus through the “School of Mary.”[14] Similarly, the Eucharist is a continual theme in his work, and the two full-length documents devoted entirely to its meaning are his early letter, Dominicae Cenae (1980) and his final encyclical, Ecclesia de Eucharistia (2003), respectively.[15]

Other writings with significant Eucharistic themes include Dies Domine (1998), the final section of his Trinitarian catechesis (The Trinity’s Embrace, 2000-2001), and, of course, after inaugurating the Year of the Eucharist in 2004-2005, he produced the apostolic letter Mane Nobiscum Domine (2004).[16] Earlier, in his Lenten sermons in the presence of Pope Paul VI (1976), then Cardinal Wojtyla makes reference to the ‘fundamental subject’ of priestly prayer – liturgical prayer – as well as non-liturgical prayer.[17] In liturgical prayer, he primarily referred to the Eucharist: “It is the divine presence, then, which ‘sanctifies’ the community of believers ‘in the truth’ (Jn 17:17, 19). The loftiest sign of this presence is constituted by the liturgy, which is the epiphany of the consecration of God’s people.’”[18]

By “consecration.” Wojtyla underscored the sustained (re)commitment of the people of God to the path of holiness. The process of sanctification requires free agency in each human subject, in which the subjugation of the self’s desires to God’s will is made possible in a free response to God’s prior initiative. The Trinitarian catechesis concludes with a section entitled “The Eucharist and the Kingdom,” where he discusses facets of Eucharist, namely “celebration,” “memorial,” “sacrifice of praise,” “banquet of communion,” “taste of eternity in time,” and “sacrament of the Church’s unity.”[19] The baptised human person finds in the Eucharist a uniquely repeatable participation in the one unrepeatable historical event of Christ’s Passion and a share in his resurrected life. This is possible in spite of the historical trajectories of “war, violence, oppression, injustice and moral decay,” which, for John Paul II, call to mind the apocalyptic visions of the Book of Revelation (cf. 6:1-8). [20]

For John Paul II, Eucharistic worship is the path to a complete anthropological understanding of the human person, a hopeful embodiment of the future life pledged in the Eucharistic feast. Mary’s role in this journey, according to John Paul II, is to direct persons to the Eucharist, in which the face of Christ is present. In other words, the Eucharist is a central point of convergence for the life of persons in communion: “For Christians in general, the concept of communio itself has a primarily religious and sacral meaning, one connected with the Eucharist, which is a sacramentum communiois between Christ and his disciples – between God and human beings.”[21] The sacramal meaning of communio – especially as expressed in the Marian typology of the Church – cannot be separated from a Eucharistic encounter with the risen Christ. The “sacramentum communiois,” the sacred, or Holy Communion, is a cosmic social moment, embracing the human person in his or her totality while feeding the person with the redemptive person of Christ. There is a sense in which John Paul’s explanation of the Church’s doctrine concerning Christ and his work is, at times, more catechetical than dogmatic. Avery Dulles identified this tendency as John Paul’s “method of correlation,” emphasising the correspondence between the questions of human existence and the divine answers that arrive in the person of Christ.[22] In fact, both the Eucharistic and the Marian aspects of John Paul’s thought are in constant relation to an appreciation of the existential anxiety that arises in the human condition. The human person exists between multiple plains of meaning, desire, temptation, and only finds the fullness of life in the paradoxical abandonment of the self to God, which is apparent in the Eucharist.

The Eucharistic encounter with Christ is also the affirmation of the Marian arc, in which the Lord’s Mother acts as the type par excellence of the Church.

In the Apostolic Letter, Redemptoris Mater, Mary is presented as central to the Gospel mission in the Church’s life. [23] From the beginning, it is John Paul’s Christocentrism that
defines the terms in which Mary is treated. She is the human factor in the Holy Spirit’s cooperative work of the Incarnation, by which the Word takes flesh.[24] In one sense, she is the fleshly hinge upon which the Holy Spirit’s action turns. She is the human person whose faithful obedience in the fullness of time precedes the conception, birth and work of Christ, and whose gift of her own flesh makes possible the Incarnation. [25] In the hiddenness of Mary’s embodied interiority, the Church’s pilgrim journey locates its beginning, for she is both Theotókos and Mother of the Church.[26] As Mother, Mary plays a continually active role in the life of the Church, and so she cannot be relegated simply to historical or typological significance. In fact, in each of these categories, her significance continues in the life of the Church, for she intercedes as an active agent of grace fully obedient to the Son. In our own circumstances, the contemporaneous confrontation with sin and evil – the ancient enmity – is given impetus and encouragement by the prayerful involvement of Mary.[27] Her involvement is maternal, but always directed towards the same end: Jesus Christ, just as it was at the beginning of his public ministry in Cana.[28]

Development of Vatican II

John Paul II develops the teaching of Vatican II and Paul VI on Mary with an emphasis on her presence as an arc to the Christian life, one that is holy, spotless, maternal and faithful; “Mary guides the faithful to the Eucharist.”[29] It is clear that for John Paul, the possibility for each of these roles in Mary is her concrete vocation as a person in history characterised as the particular mother of a particular person, recognised as the Son of God. Without the peculiarly local aspect of Mary’s vocation at a fixed point in history (the ‘fullness of time’), Mary’s overarching vocation in regards to the ecclesia and to each individual believer would be a transcendent impossibility. A mother is a mother of someone. A person is a person somewhere and at some time. In fact, the Marian arc can only make sense in John Paul II’s theological structure because of its shared vocational context in the ambiguous complexities of history. “She [the Church] sees Mary deeply rooted in humanity's history, in man's eternal vocation according to the providential plan which God has made for him from eternity.”[30] The maternal vocation then is central in John Paul’s theology, and it is so because of the historical particularities of the person of Mary.

Mary herself was caught up in the conflict of good versus evil. In John Paul’s thought, the human person is a participant in the same historical drama of good versus evil as each other human person, acting with free agency, fundamentally open to the divine Other. Life, lived according to its sacred meaning, is a radical openness to the gift given Eucharistically. This same divine Other – the blessed Trinity – bestows upon the lowly, poor, refugee, prayerful virgin, a powerful intercessory role. In her vocation as the teacher and in her Eucharistic orientation, Mary is a “woman of the Eucharist.”[31] This role is crucial to John Paul II’s theology, as is the notion that the Eucharist confects a change in our anthropological vision. It is a vision not just of the giftedness in which the human person – the other – may be seen, but of the work that is to be done on their behalf. Using Mary as a paradigm, John Paul draws on simple but profound language to explain the link between the Eucharist and the human person: “A significant consequence of the eschatological tension inherent in the Eucharist is also the fact that it spurs us on our journey through history and plants a seed of living hope in our daily commitment to the work before us. Certainly the Christian vision leads to the expectation of ‘new heavens’ and ‘a new earth’ (Rev 21:1), but this increases, rather than lessens, our sense of responsibility for the world today.”[32]

The Marian arc and its orientation towards the Eucharistic face of Christ directs the action of Christian life in service toward others. The increased weight of our responsibility for the world in its manifold sufferings is predicated on the trifold connection between Christ, his mother, and the Eucharist. The Cross and Resurrection cannot be thought of apart from one another in this theological vision, which provokes members of the Church to pray, to live and to act with unremitting generosity and to hope. In a sense, the absence of any one of these three calls the authenticity of the others into question. This theology is reverberated in the gestures and the teaching of Francis, who has spoken glowingly of his predecessors and has a rich Marian spirituality, with particular reference to Mary Undoer of Knots, for example.

Such a theology sits provocatively at the forefront of Francis’ call to serious-minded, albeit joyful work, while always needing renewal and refreshment through continued reflection.

Francis’s Call to Action

The call to action in the teaching of Francis builds upon the legacy of John Paul II, for whom to live the human life well is to live responsibly, respecting the logic of the divine gift, and this is what it means to live Eucharistically. John Paul II’s Eucharistic-anthropology of the gift will undoubtedly
be developed further by a new generation of theologians; meanwhile Pope Francis is already putting this theology into practice, acting on the need to reform the Church, orienting her more profoundly to mission and proclamation.

Without John Paul II’s theological foundation, Francis would only be speaking from a political context, which is precisely the danger the Council wished to avert. After all, he called to feed the famished and raise the poor out of poverty have driven a number of political and social agendas (largely unsuccessfully) in the twentieth century, and it remains a problem that interpreters of Francis view his language in political rather than theological terms. Keeping in mind the words of Gaudium et spes and of the strong distinction between the Church and the world of politics, Francis can speak from a Christo-centric and Eucharistic theological foundation in his daring assessment of politics and economics. He says at one point: “Today we also have to say ‘thou shalt not’ to an economy of such exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. I beg the Lord to grant us more politicians who are genuinely disturbed by the state of society, the people, the lives of the poor!”[33] Francis is showing how the Church is not indifferent to politics or the work of politicians, but her role is exercised according to a Christological and Eucharistic nature and purpose. On the philosophical front, Francis displays enormous confidence in the moral and social teachings of the Church and this is pause for thought. He does not have the burdensome task of interpretation before him; this was largely undertaken by the previous two papacies. What Francis exhibits is not a hermeneutic of Vatican II, but a concrete expression of the mercy the Council Fathers wished the Church to convey to the world. To safeguard the transcendence of the human person, Francis builds upon the Eucharistic nature of Christian self-offering, of centering our ecclesial life upon the face of Christ at the altar and in the poor.

This is echoed beautifully in the words of Pope Benedict XVI: “The whole of our life must be oriented to meeting Jesus Christ, to loving him; and, in our life we must allocate a central place to loving our neighbour, that love which, in the light of the Crucified One, enables us to recognize the face of Jesus in the poor, in the weak and in the suffering. This is only possible if the true face of Jesus has become familiar to us through listening to his word, in an inner conversation with him, in entering this word so that we truly meet him, and of course, in the Mystery of the Eucharist.”[34] The act of meeting Jesus, of lovingly looking toward his face, and of seeking him in the poor, the weak, and the suffering, cannot be separated from Christ in the Eucharist. The light of Christ is cast upon all facets of reality and gives profound clarity and vision in sight of those who suffer. In Lumen Fidei, Francis articulates this with reference to the work of saints such as Francis of Assisi and Mother Teresa of Calcutta who dedicated their lives to the service of the poor.[35] In this way, the transcendent character of the human person is safeguarded through a commitment which is theological and liturgical.

Finally, Francis practices his faith out of a spirituality that takes serious account of discernment and the greater glory of God – two hallmarks of Jesuit spirituality. The experience of practicing his priesthood in Argentina during the infamous ‘dirty wars,’ his teaching appointments in Literature and Psychology to high school students (no easy task!), and his work in Spain, Germany and Ireland might each be said to have reinforced his reliance on Jesuit-style discernment. Francis has also insisted that God’s means always surpass our inadequate human means, as he reflects on Jesus spirituality: “The Society must always have before itself the Deus semper maior, the always-greater God, and the pursuit of the ever greater glory of God, the church as true bride of Christ our Lord, Christ the king who conquers us and to whom we offer our whole person and all our hard work, even if we are clay pots, inadequate. This tension takes us out of ourselves continuously.”[36]

Conclusion

Pope Francis roots the importance of safeguarding the transcendent character of the human person through a serious-minded discernment and the cultivation of the interior life that is ultimately oriented to the needs of others outside ourselves. The theology of the Council and especially Gaudium et Spes, as interpreted by John Paul II, is being made manifest and this is the challenge to the Church: To make the concern for the poor and care for the dignity of the human person a steady, continual and sustained part of her ecclesial life – and this, not for our own sake, but for the sake of Christ who reveals himself in the face of the other. Such a theology, by its nature, is called to be fleshed out in prayer, living and action.

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ENDNOTES

[2] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid, see 27, 47.
[27] Ibid, 11.
[29] Ibid, 44.
[34] Benedict XVI, General Audience (16 Jan 2013).
In the next issue of *The Newman Rambler*

**Mercy and Human Dignity:**

**Essays on ‘Dying with Dignity’ & the ‘Future of the Family’**

- Human dignity and severe cognitive impairment  
  Most Rev. Peter Comensoli, Bishop of Sydney, Australia

- The dangerous logic of physician-assisted suicide  
  Nigel Biggar, Oxford University

- Caring for terminally-ill newborns and the search for meaning  
  Elvira Parravicini, MD, Columbia Univ. Medical Center

- The travesty of Bill 52 and the Quebec commission on Dying with Dignity  
  Margaret Somerville, FRSC, McGill University

- What theology brings to the concept of ‘dignity’  
  Paul Allen, Concordia University

- The history of the movement in favour of physician-assisted suicide  
  Ian Dowbiggin, FRSC, University of Prince Edward Island

- Euthanasia in Italian and EU constitutional law  
  Chiara Berneri, City University of London

- The history of devotion to the Holy Family in Canada  
  Neil J. Roy, St. Benedict Center, MA

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