

Reasons for Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Second Vatican Council

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To meaningfully celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council we need to ask: why did Pope John XXIII think a General (Ecumenical) Council of the Church was needed? and what did it achieve?

Based on his extensive pastoral experience in many countries he felt the Church needed to be in better shape to carry out its mission in the kind of world that was emerging. And he knew it was his responsibility, in union with all the bishops around the world, to discuss what needed to be done.

Of course, Pope John was well aware of the many good features of the Church's life at that time. The Catholic people were very loyal to their faith; they turned up in good numbers for Sunday Masses and various devotions; likewise, it was the huge generosity of the Catholic people and of religious orders that enabled the establishment and running of a remarkable network of Catholic schools in countries like New Zealand. Vocations to priesthood and religious life in countries like ours seemed plentiful; the work of the Church's missionaries was heroic; and lay people participated in various forms of the lay apostolate. In the 1950s we seemed to be riding the crest of a wave.

Perhaps, however, it was not all as good as it seemed. In fact, many of the problems that followed the Council derived from the inadequate formation - scriptural, catechetical and liturgical - Catholics had received *before* the Council. It will help to make some simple comparisons between the life of the Church as we experience it today, and the life of the Church as Pope John experienced it before the Council. There are features of the Church's life we now take for granted that were not part of the Catholic people's experience before the Council.

Before we make these comparisons, however, three preliminary points need to be made:

- (i) The primary focus of the Council was "renewal". This has to do with the deepening of our relationship with the Risen Christ, affecting our relationships with one another – what it means to be "the body of Christ". "Reforms", on the other hand, are the changes needed to facilitate renewal, as we shall see from the comparisons we will make between the pre- and post-Vatican II life of the Church.
- (ii) During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there had been considerable study of the scriptures, the early Church writings and the history of the liturgy. This "return to the sources" (generally known as "Ressourcement") provided wider perspectives on the Church than were available in the theology text books in use before the Council. These Ressourcement studies became decisive in the direction the Council took, and

they continue to be useful tools for properly interpreting and implementing the Council.

- (iii) Thirdly, there is wisdom and reassurance in Pope John's reminder that "the substance of the ancient doctrine of the faith is one thing, and the way in which is presented is another" (Opening Speech, 11 Oct 1962). In other words, the Church and its mission remain the same even as it strives to improve the ways it exercises its ministries, celebrates its sacraments, and expresses its teachings.

What, then, are some of the "changes" or reforms the Council authorised in order to facilitate the deepening of our relationship with Christ and with one another? The following examples might help to deepen our appreciation of why we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of this great Council.

1. Before the Council, it was commonly assumed that responsibility for the mission of the Church lay only with the ordained, and that the call to holiness was only, or mainly, for those who took the vows of religious life. But the Council taught that *all* the baptised share responsibility for the mission of the Church, albeit differently, and *all* the baptised are called to holiness. For lay men and women, carrying out the mission of the Church and growing in holiness both come about *in the circumstances of their daily secular lives*. Such is baptism that ordinary secular life is where it all happens!
2. We now take it for granted that the Mass and sacraments will be celebrated in our own languages. Partly as a counterpoint to Protestant practice, the Catholic Church had previously insisted on Latin. The Council decided that the Catholic people could be better nurtured and renewed through "full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy" (*Constitution on the Liturgy*, n.14).
3. Similarly, we take for granted the use of the Lectionary at Mass. But the Lectionary only came into existence because of the Council's insistence on the importance of the scriptures for our nurture. Previously, Catholics heard only a very narrow selection of scripture readings from the Missal being used before the Council. In fact, it used to be considered that one had "heard" Sunday Mass even if one arrived *after* the Liturgy of the Word!
4. The Council also authorised what we now call *inculturation* (*Constitution on the Liturgy*, nn.37, 38). Pope Paul VI later used a musical image when he spoke of the need to "transpose" the gospel into other cultures in "the fields of liturgical expression, catechesis, theological formulation, and secondary Church structures" (*Apostolic Letter on Evangelisation*, n.63). This acceptance of plurality is consistent with the Church's most ancient tradition, but breaks with the

uniformity that had been prevalent in the Church of the West during recent centuries.

5. In the wake of the Protestant Reformation (16th Century), the Enlightenment (17th – 18th Centuries) and *Modernism* (19th and early 20th Centuries), the Church's reaction was understandably defensive, but also led to an exaggerated rejection of some features of emerging democratic societies (cf *Syllabus of Errors*, *Pope Pius IX*) and to a distancing of the Church and the world from each other. Even within the Church modern scholarship was sometimes suspect and inhibited. In that climate the Catholic people's experience of the Church tended to be narrowed down, conformist, routine and inward looking. Very important openings to renewal have come with the Council's teachings concerning Divine Revelation, Religious Freedom, Human Dignity, and engagement with the world.
6. The unfinished work of the first Vatican Council (which was interrupted by the Franco-Prussian war) had resulted in a very one-sided way of experiencing the Church's authority: the ministry of the Pope tended to eclipse the role of the bishops. The Second Vatican Council reaffirmed ancient Catholic belief that *all* the bishops share responsibility for the governance of the universal Church – with and under the Pope. In practice, this has led to the formation of Bishops' Conferences and to more decisions being made by the bishops for their local regions.
7. It is also to the credit of the Council that the Catholic Church has passed from a period of aloofness from the ecumenical movement (which started among Protestant churches) to a time of positive and proactive ecumenical engagement.

These are just some of the reasons for celebrating this great Council. Every Pope since the Council has urged Catholics to faithfully implement its teachings.