

Chapter Twelve

Catholic Renewal in Modern Times: 1. The Second Vatican Council

Purpose: The main purpose of this talk is to encourage all participants, Catholics and other Christians, to understand the extent and the scope of the Church renewal decided on by the Second Vatican Council. This is essential for a proper understanding of the present situation in the Catholic Church. It is also necessary so that we can situate charismatic renewal within the wider renewal of the Catholic Church worldwide. If we realize how much renewal has already taken place in the Catholic Church in the last 50 years it encourages us to believe that what the Holy Spirit has begun the Holy Spirit will complete. We need to understand that Church renewal is a long-term process and cannot happen quickly. We also need to see how the different dimensions of renewal are inter-connected: spiritual-personal, corporate, biblical, liturgical, pastoral, ecumenical, the Jewish dimension, etc.

Presentation: It is important to bring this story alive. It needs to be more than a list of documents, names and dates. It is helpful to pick out three or four leading figures and to bring them to life, showing how they played a key role in a particular dimension of Church renewal. The decisive role of Vatican Two needs to be clearly indicated, showing pre-Vatican II developments as a preparation for the Council, and Vatican II as giving all the key trends an official endorsement and summoning the Catholic Church to ongoing renewal. The task of implementing a renewal agenda at all levels of the Church's life began with Vatican II. The massive importance of John Paul II is treated in Chapter Thirteen.

The Holy Spirit is always Preparing the Future

The focus of this teaching is the reforming and renewing work of the Second Vatican Council. As we shall see, this renewal concerns every dimension of the life of the Church. In each dimension of the Church's renewal, the Holy Spirit was at work, evidently for several decades in advance, preparing the way through prophetic pioneer figures who received a call from the Lord, though they might not all have described it in these terms. Every renewal of the Church happens in this way: first, prophetic pioneers and visionaries, then a growing school or movement of their followers, and finally the reception of this vision and orientation by the hierarchy of the Church. It would have been totally impossible for Vatican Two to achieve what it did if there had been no advance preparation of this kind.

The Key Elements in the Work of Vatican Two

Much of the work of the Council was concerned with the Church. Early on, the decision was made to structure much of the Council's work around two documents: one on the Church in herself (in Latin the Church *ad intra*) and the other on the Church in the world (the Church *ad extra*). The first became the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (known as *Lumen Gentium* by its opening words in Latin) and the second became the Pastoral Constitution on the Church

in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*).¹ But the first document debated and the first to be promulgated was the Constitution on the Liturgy. The key principles of liturgical renewal were spelled out, of which I just take a sample:

- “In this restoration both texts and rites should be drawn up so as to express more clearly the holy things which they signify. The Christian people, as far as is possible, should be able to understand them with ease and take part in them fully, actively, and as a community.” (para. 21).
- “Provided that the substantial unity of the Roman rite is preserved, provision shall be made, when revising the liturgical books, for legitimate variations and adaptations to different groups, regions and peoples, especially in mission countries.” (para. 38).
- “The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly so that a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word.” (para. 51).
- “By means of the homily the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are expounded from the sacred text” (para. 52).

The decisions taken on the liturgy had some important repercussions for the teaching on the Church. It expressed a liturgical community view of the Church not an organizational-institutional view. So, for example: “the principal manifestation of the Church consists in the full, active participation of all God’s holy people in the same liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in one prayer, at one altar, at which the bishop presides, surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers.” (Liturgy, para. 41). The decisions to allow the use of local languages in the liturgy necessitated more authority being given to bishops’ conferences. The decision to restore the adult catechumenate restoring the liturgical context to Catholic formation programmes had wider implications.

The Constitution on the Church was the most foundational document. I try to describe its main characteristics and emphases:

- A communion-grounded view of the Church (the Church is above all communion) with its model in the Trinity. So LG begins with a para on the Father, a para on the Son, and a para on the Holy Spirit (paras. 2 – 4).
- There are two deeply biblical chapters (the first on the Mystery of the Church, the second on the People of God) before the chapter on “The Church as Hierarchical”.
- Then Chapter 4 is on the Laity and chapter 5 on The call to Holiness. Here the call and mission of the laity in the Church is grounded in their baptism. It does not come, as had been often said before, from delegation by priest or bishop. The call of every baptized person to holiness comes before Chapter 6 on Religious. Here there was a deliberate correction of the wrong view that only special consecrated people were called to holiness and to a significant role in the mission of the Church.

¹ The Council documents were made up of Constitutions (Liturgy, Church, Church in Modern World, Divine Revelation), the foundational documents; of Decrees (all except the other categories), of Declarations (Christian Education, Non-Christian Religions, Religious Liberty). The Constitutions carry the most authority. The Decrees contain the application of the Constitutions to the pastoral life of the Church. The Declarations are statements of principle regarding areas not seen as directly teaching divine revelation.

- Chapter 7 brings in the eschatological goal of the Church. The Church is oriented towards the coming of the Lord and his Kingdom in its fullness. This was a fruit of returning to the biblical roots of the faith.
- Chapter 8 then treated of the role of Mary within the Church and within salvation history. The debate whether to include the teaching on Mary in that on the Church or whether to give Mary a separate document produced the most controverted and emotional sessions at the Council, as well as the closest vote (1,112 for inclusion; 1,072 for separate).

A key document among the Decrees was that on Ecumenism. This represented a major break-through for before the Council the Catholic Church was not involved in the ecumenical movement and was first negative and later very cautious in its approach. The key elements in this decree are:

- The recognition that the Holy Spirit is present and active in other Church communities and traditions, not just in individuals.
- The recognition that the Catholic Church is always in need of renewal.
- The recognition that both sides were at fault in the divisions (no longer is all the fault placed on those who broke away).

The Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, is another key document. Biblical renewal and liturgical renewal are closely linked. Among the important contributions of *Dei Verbum* are:

- “Christ ... is himself both the mediator and the sum total of Revelation.” (para. 2). Divine Revelation is supremely the revelation of a person, Jesus Christ, and not primarily of propositions.
- Scripture and Tradition should be seen together and not assumed to be separate “sources” of revelation.
- The Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant.” (para. 10).
- The Scriptures teach “faithfully and without error ... that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation wished to see confided” to the Bible (para. 11).
- “Access to sacred Scripture ought to be wide open to the Christian faithful.” (para. 22). This represented an end to all Catholic restrictions on or discouragement of Bible reading by the laity.
- The study of Scripture “should be the ... soul of sacred theology.” (para. 24).

In the Decree on Bishops, the Council took *Lumen Gentium* further. In particular the role of Bishop as teacher is underlined.

In the Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council looked at the Church in relation to the world. The first part deals with the theme in general, the second examined particular areas (Family, Culture, Economics, Politics, Peace). In the first part, each section ends with a teaching on the person of Jesus (para. 22 on Christ as the New Man, para. 32 on The Word Made Flesh and Human Solidarity; para. 38 on the Fulfilment of Human Activity in the Paschal Mystery; para. 45 on Christ: Alpha and Omega. These paras enrich the Church’s Christology and take in the whole global and cosmic roles of Jesus the Christ. John Paul II often took up what is said about Jesus as God’s model for humanity: “Christ the Lord, Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling.” (para 22). This linking of Christology to the authentically human will make possible a greater integration of Catholic social

teaching with a systematic theology. The section on Peace recognizes for the first time allowing a place for conscientious objection to war (para. 79). On “total warfare”, the bishops teach: “Every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and man, which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation.” (para. 80).

The Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*, broke new ground with two key affirmations:

- The right to religious liberty is rooted in the dignity of the human person: it “must be given such recognition in the constitutional order of society as will make it a civic right” (para. 2).
- States have no right to interfere in the religious sphere, except where genuine public order in society is at stake (see para. 3).
- “The act of faith is of its very nature a free act.” (para. 10). Therefore all pressure and coercion in this matter is wrong.

The Declaration on Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, represents the first-ever Catholic official teaching on Non-Christian Religions. “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions.” (para. 2). “Muslims ... worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men.” (para. 3). Then the Church recognizes the special place of the Jews, who “remain very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made.” (para. 4). This last citation includes a footnote reference to Rom. 11: 28 – 29).