

We Have the Pillars, But the Building is Still Unfinished

By Richard Gaillardetz

I regularly give talks on the Second Vatican Council in parishes and pastoral conferences attended largely by graying crowds. I inevitably remind the audience that many of us may not live to see the council's vision fully implemented. We must each be willing to further that vision for the sake of a future church, perhaps, of 2050. Nevertheless, I can almost count on some form of: "How do you avoid despairing at the gap between the council's bracing vision and its tepid and superficial implementation in the church today?"

The sense of discouragement is often palpable. Indeed, the litany of disappointments I hear can feel overwhelming:

- frustration with the youngest generation of priests, too many more interested in birettas, cassocks and clerical prerogatives than with humble service to God's people.
- while applauding the good intentions and devout faith of many priests recruited from abroad, they note that too often these priests are unfamiliar with and/or disinterested in the people's genuine pastoral needs and expectations.
- bewildered by the seemingly arbitrary public policy concerns that occupy the attention of their bishops, they resent being warned of the eternal consequences of voting for the wrong candidates for public office, or of supporting complex legislative measures regarding questions that, to their mind, do not rise to the level of dogma.

People wonder why their leaders do not seem interested in their own insights and concerns regarding the challenges and demands of Christian living. Catholics are eager to use their gifts and talents in service of the church but chafe at pastors who see their gifts as a threat to clerical control. They complain of being forced to accept a poor, ideologically driven translation of the Roman Missal.

What is to be said in response to such heart-felt, aching discouragement?

First, the pain and disappointment we all experience is real and it must not be dismissed. But we must strive to transform our pain and disappointment into productive ecclesial action that remains faithful to the church we love.

Second, we must not overlook or take for granted the gains already ours because of the council: a) we participate more fully and consciously in the common worship of the church; b) our easy access to the Scriptures and Bible study; c) our unprecedented opportunities for advanced theological education; d) our ability to celebrate with non-Catholic Christians in common prayer and through respectful dialogue that seeks to overcome our differences; e) our renunciation of anti-Semitism while celebrating our spiritual kinship with Judaism; f) our fruitful dialogue with, and affirmation of other religious traditions' elements of goodness and truth.

Third, the Second Vatican Council is an ecclesial fact; the twenty-first ecumenical council. It must not, it cannot, be erased from the church's memory or trivialized by carefully sanitized reinterpretations. We must learn its teaching and be tireless in keeping it alive. We must also recognize, as the German theologian Herman Pottmeyer put it, the council is an "unfinished building site." Yet the edifice does have a set of pillars already in place. We can work diligently

to build on these pillars in order to complete the project. Many have already been discussed in this issue, but are worth recalling:

The priority of baptism.

The Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*, 10), repudiated a baroque vision of the church as an “unequal society” comprised of two ranks, clergy and laity. It stressed the priority of Christian baptism and affirmed our primary identity as *Christifideles*, the Christian faithful.

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, 14) insisted that all the faithful are called to a full, conscious and active participation in the eucharistic worship.

The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicum Actuositatem*, 3) acknowledged the charisms we received at our baptism, charisms that we have a right and an obligation to exercise, in communion with our pastors, to build up of the church mission of service in the world.

The Decree on Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 9) obliged the pastors to celebrate those gifts, testing and ordering them for the building up of the church. *Lumen Gentium* affirmed that each of the baptized possess a supernatural instinct for the faith (*sensus fidei*) that allows us to hear God’s Word, penetrate its meaning and apply it more fully in our lives.

The Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*, 8), insisted that because of this instinct for the faith, all the faithful participate in the development of tradition, and consequently (*Lumen Gentium*), they have a right to make their questions, insights and competencies known to their church leaders.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*, 43) called the baptized to an adult faith, demanding that they take the initiative in bringing the gospel into their homes, their workplace, their election booth. It frankly acknowledged that the clergy can offer some spiritual guidance but that they will not have an answer to every pressing question.

Confident humility.

The Catholicism of the immediate pre-conciliar period was too often triumphalist in its self-understanding. The dominant ecclesiology on the council's eve held the church was a "perfect society," not in the sense of moral perfection but ecclesial self-sufficiency. It possessed all it required to fulfill its mission. Its triumphalism presumed it had nothing to learn from other Christian traditions, convinced the only appropriate form of Catholic ecumenism was a passionate plea for wayward Christians to return to the one true church. It was combative in denouncing the forces of evil afoot in the world, insistent the church alone possessed the answers to all the questions of this or any age.

But three years of council deliberation dramatically shifted its self-understanding. The council recognized that the church was not merely comprised of individual pilgrims on the journey toward their salvation, but was itself a "pilgrim people." Therefore, as a church, it would not achieve its perfection until the "the consummation of history" (*Lumen Gentium*).

The Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 6), taught that as a pilgrim people the church was always in need of reform and renewal insofar as it was a human institution. *Dei Verbum* asserted that the church, as recipient of God's revelation in Christ by the Spirit, was moving toward "the fullness of divine truth." *Gaudium et Spes* confirmed confidence in the council's belief that with Christ the church had much to offer a world wounded by sin but it also

recognized that divine revelation did not offer answers to every question facing humankind today. Finally, this confident humility was reflected in the council's genuine openness to the world, its celebration of the world's legitimate autonomy and its recognition that God's grace and traces of the reign of God could be identified outside the boundaries of the church.

The collegial vision of ecclesial leadership.

To counteract the impression of a one-sided papo-centrism that had emerged out of Vatican I (1869-70) suggesting Catholicism was an absolute monarchy (Richard?), Vatican II reaffirmed **much (Richard?)** of Vatican I's teaching on the papacy but placed it in a new ecclesiological framework, an ecclesiology of communion. It recovered the theological significance of the diocese as a local church possessing its own relative autonomy (*Lumen Gentium*). It presented the universal church as neither a pyramidal monolith nor a mere confederation of independent congregations but rather as a communion of local churches. It rejected the assumption that bishops were mere vicars of the pope, they were in fact themselves vicars of Christ in their local churches.

In both *Lumen Gentium* and **The Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church** (*Christus Dominus*) the council went to great pains to stress the pastoral role of bishops as shepherds of their local churches while reminding them that their responsibility as pastors must be understood within the framework of their more basic identity as baptized Christians, citing St. Augustine: "What I am for you terrifies me; what I am with you consoles me. For you I am a bishop; but with you I am a Christian. The former is a duty; the latter a grace. The former is a danger; the latter, salvation." Finally, the council taught that all the bishops share with the bishop of Rome membership in an episcopal college patterned after the college of the apostles

and, as such, all the bishops share in pastoral leadership over the universal church (*Lumen Gentium*). All the clergy are encouraged to work respectfully and cooperatively with the laity in the building up of the church in service of its mission in the world (*Apostolicum Actuositatum; Presbyterorum Ordinis*).

Unfortunately, the bishops largely refrained from articulating norms for the implementation of its teaching on collegiality. The church today employs the rhetoric of collegiality but has few if any effective structures for implementing the council's teaching.

The catholicity of the church.

The church is more than a stifling uniformity, it is catholic as a unity-in-diversity. In *Lumen gentium* the bishops developed the theological foundations for the catholicity of the church, grounding it in the unity-in-diversity of the triune God. They affirmed that a diversity of language and culture enriched the unity of the church, that the cultural distinctiveness of different peoples might even find a place in the celebration of the liturgy (*Sacrosanctum concilium*). As the church fulfills its mission in the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ to all nations, the council taught that this saving Gospel, the foundation of our Christian unity, must find expression in and through human culture. Although the council never used the term, it clearly understood that effective Christian mission requires authentic inculturation (**The Decree on Mission Activity of the Church** (*Ad Gentes*, 22)).

Church history tell us that almost every period of serious change in the church has been followed by a certain cautionary reaction. Legitimate concerns for excessive and one-sided readings of council teaching have their place, but not at the expense of our obligation to implement the council's bracing vision.

My concern is to reinforce the “facticity” of the council. These pillars are now part of our doctrinal heritage and they must be vigorously reaffirmed wherever Catholic complacency or ecclesiastical intransigence risks overlooking their significance and pastoral implications.

The building is still unfinished. **The pillars are there (Richard? And I reworked the following). To us falls** the demanding task of bringing this building project to completion by keeping the deep wisdom of the council alive even in an inhospitable time.