by Edward P. Hahnenberg

Once mentioned Vatican II in class and a student in the back raised his hand to ask, “Why don’t they call it Vatican One, like Air Force One?” This sincere undergraduate thought I was talking about the pope’s airplane. When I began to explain that Vatican II was a worldwide gathering of Catholic bishops that took place in the early 1960s, his eyes glazed over as he muttered, “The Sixties? That’s ancient history!”

The exchange reminded me of my first encounter with the Second Vatican Council years ago. As a student myself, I was forced to read from a thick little paperback with a red cover called The Documents of Vatican II. My classmates and I at St. Mary High School complained that the passages were so long, so hard to follow, so boring. We didn’t appreciate then that this little book was the result of a truly Spirit-filled, groundbreaking event. We didn’t know that the ideas contained within it were once radical or that they were shaping our Church in profound ways. It all seemed to us—even just a few years after the Council—like ancient history.

Forty years have now passed since the last of the 16 documents of Vatican II were signed and sent out to the Church. What effect have they had? What value do they still have for us today? In closing out the Jubilee Year 2000, Pope John Paul II spoke of the documents of Vatican II as a great treasure for the Church, a sentiment recently repeated by Pope Benedict XVI. But for some of us, this treasure may still be buried, waiting to be uncovered. This Update is meant to be a kind of treasure map, leading those with an adventurous spirit to discover or rediscover the riches hidden in the Council’s documents.

That was then, this is now

Vatican II ended in 1965. And for a while afterwards, everybody commented on how much the Church was changing—how the years after the Council seemed so different from the years before it. For those who loved all the newness and energy sparked by the Council, their refrain was: “That was then, this is now.” The Mass in Latin, clericalism, a closed Catholic ghetto was then, part of our past, described as “pre-Vatican II.” Participation in liturgy, parish collaboration, an openness to the world is now, part of our future, “post-Vatican II.”

Today the focus has shifted. Now the interesting comparison is not so much between the pre-Vatican II period and the post-Vatican II period. Instead, the interesting comparison is between the
time of the Council and our own time. So much has changed in the past 40 years. When those 2,500 bishops gathered in Rome in the early 1960s, the Western world was in the midst of the Cold War, facing Communism and the threat of all-out nuclear war. At the same time, the 60s were about to explode—with its shock waves of student demonstrations, women’s liberation, civil rights and anti-war activism. In the midst of all this, the Church took up the challenge of updating its enormous institutions— institutions run by a huge corps of clergy and religious.

Today, it is not the Cold War but an open-ended War on Terror that shakes our security. Communism and “the Bomb” have been pushed aside by militant fundamentalism and the threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction. The social movements of the 60s have been replaced by complicated questions about cloning, stem-cell research and globalization. Now the institutions of the Church are struggling to survive with fewer and fewer priests to run parishes and with resources—and trust—strained by the sexual-abuse crisis. And yet, at the same time, lay ministries are flourishing. Catholic colleges are expanding, and parish communities are more active than ever in planning their worship, sharing their faith and reaching out in service to their neighbors in need.

We might be surprised at how few of the issues that seem so important to us today are found in the documents of Vatican II. We might be tempted to say, “That was then, this is now,” and leave the Council texts behind. What makes these documents relevant? What justifies John Paul II’s claim that “with the passing of the years, the Council documents have lost nothing of their value or brilliance”?

Behind the pope’s confidence, I think, was his sense that Vatican II offered large principles with lasting value. When we reflect on these larger themes, we see that there is virtually no area of Church life today that is not affected by the Council. If you’ve ever taken part in a Bible study, witnessed the Easter Vigil liturgy, served on a parish council or as a eucharistic minister, attended a non-Catholic worship service, reflected on politics in light of your faith, read about a statement from the bishops’ conference, picked up the Catechism of the Catholic Church, volunteered for a parish service project, been to a funeral or skimmed a Catholic Update—if you’ve done any of these things, you’ve experienced the effects of the Second Vatican Council. The themes of the Council are what help explain to us as a Church where we are today. And, more important, they inspire us to where we can be tomorrow.

More than a thick little book

Vatican II was an event, a grace-filled moment in the life of the Church. An aging Pope John XXIII caught everyone by surprise when he announced his plans to hold a council. And he surprised everyone again with his opening speech on October 11, 1962. There he publicly disagreed with those “prophets of gloom” around him who saw in the modern world only “prevarication and ruin.” Instead, Pope John believed, God is moving humanity to a new order of human relations. The Church needs aggiornamento—“updating”—not because the Church feels threatened, but because of its great desire to share the joy of Christ. The pope pointed toward the renewal of the Church with the beautiful words, “It is now only dawn.”

By the time the Second Vatican Council closed on December 8, 1965, it had seen two popes (John XXIII died on June 3, 1963; Pope Paul VI continued the Council), four sessions (meeting in the autumn months from 1962 to 1965), and 168 general congregations, or daily meetings. Over 2,500 bishops and other Church leaders took part. 2,212 speeches were delivered, more than 4,300 additional comments were submitted in writing, and over 1.5 million ballots—deciding everything from formal approval of final documents to individual words in early drafts—were cast. The end result was 16 documents—103,014 words in Latin. 600 pages in the latest English translation.

Behind these final documents exist a process and a spirit of renewal as important as the texts themselves. Spirit and letter go together. Thus as important as Vatican II’s 16 documents are, they can never be separated from the spirit of the Council—a spirit of openness to the world and renewal for the Church, a spirit of faithfulness to the past and hope for the future, a spirit, above all, of joy in Christ.

The four constitutions

Of the 16 documents promulgated at Vatican II, four are foundational that they are designated “constitutions.”

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.
The very first topic the bishops took up at the Council was liturgy. They did so because—of all the draft documents prepared in advance—the one on the liturgy was in the best shape. Many of the ideas for reforming the liturgy had been in the air for some time. Vatican II pulled these ideas together and pushed them forward in a dramatic way.

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy boldly declares that the liturgy “is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the source from which all its power flows” (#10). But the liturgy can’t be the source and summit if people don’t participate in it. Thus the liturgy is to be reformed so as to encourage the “full, conscious, and active” participation of all the faithful (#14).

This call to active participation runs throughout the Constitution, guiding its many proposals. In order for people to participate, the liturgy must be easily understood. Vernacular languages should be allowed, rituals should be simplified and local adaptation should be encouraged. In parishes today, every ritual from Baptism to burial has been revised with this one driving concern in mind: that we all actively take part in what God is doing here.

In our own day, as we celebrated the 40th anniversary of Vatican II’s conclu-
Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. After the bishops debated liturgy, they turned to revelation. Unlike the draft on liturgy, the prepared draft on revelation was in poor shape. For a document on the Bible, its language was surprisingly un-biblical, using instead technical terms and philosophical concepts. Moreover, the draft had a very negative tone. Even though it recommended reading the Bible, the text was so full of warnings and cautions that it gave the impression that it was better, in the end, not even to bother.

Thanks in part to the intervention of John XXIII, this draft was sent back to committee for a complete rewrite. The final text of the Constitution speaks of revelation as, above all, a personal interaction between God and humanity: “By this revelation, then, the invisible God, from the fullness of love, addresses men and women as his friends, and lives among them, in order to invite and receive them into his own company” (#2). Revelation is not just words about God, it is a living relationship with God.

The Constitution recognizes that there is growth in our understanding of revelation. And the whole community has a role to play in handing on the tradition (#8). The document acknowledges the contributions of Scripture scholars, and points out that Bible passages must be interpreted according to the historical context and literary genres in which they were written. Finally, with great effect on subsequent Church life, the Constitution enthusiastically encourages all the faithful to read the Bible and apply it to their daily lives.

Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. While the debates on liturgy and revelation occupied most of the time at the Council’s first session (1962), the document on the Church took up most of the second session (1963). The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church is in many ways the crowning achievement of Vatican II. In it, the Council addressed the nature of the Church itself: Who do we say we are?

Before Vatican II, Catholics might have imagined the Church as something to which they simply belonged. “The Church” then was equated with its structures, its institutions, its hierarchy. But we don’t belong to the Church; we are the Church. The first draft of the Constitution reflected the pre-conciliar mentality. But through successive drafts, revisions were made to affirm more clearly that the Church is not first an institution; it is first of all a mystery bound up in the love of God, “a people made one by the unity of the Father, the Son, and the holy Spirit” (#4). The Church is not first the clergy; it is first of all the whole people of God. In fact, the most famous editorial decision of the whole Council was the decision to insert into the Constitution on the Church a chapter—chapter two on the People of God—before the chapter on the hierarchy. The arrangement reflects the theology that we are all the People of God, sharing a oneness and a baptismal equality that precedes the distinctions among different roles in the community.

The People of God theme guides the whole document. The Constitution calls for an increase in shared authority, or collegiality, among the pope and bishops (ch. 3). It claims that the laity share fully in the mission of the Church, a claim that has fostered the explosive growth of lay ministries since Vatican II (ch. 4). And the document’s confidence that everyone in the Church is called to holiness (ch. 5) is balanced by its caution that the Church is a pilgrim people, still on the way to the reign of God (ch. 7). Thus, while the outstanding
models of holiness we see around us (whether saintly popes or struggling parents) are a sign of the Kingdom “already” arrived, the tragic failures within our Church (such as the sexual abuse of children, discrimination, or indifference) painfully point out the “not yet” reality of our earthly existence.

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Some of the greatest debates of the third (1964) and fourth (1965) sessions of Vatican II were sparked by the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. The Pastoral Constitution was the only document of the final 16 that was born during the Council. Near the end of the first session, Cardinal Leon-Joseph Suenens of Belgium addressed his fellow bishops, urging them not just to examine the Church in and of itself. The Council must also examine the Church in relationship to the world at large. This intervention, fully supported by Pope John XXIII, led to the composition of an entirely new document.

The Church in the Modern World begins not with the Bible, liturgy or doctrine. It begins, in its preface, with the world, with its joys and hopes, grief and anguish. And it underlines the importance of reading the “signs of the times” in order that the Church might respond to the world in which we live (see #4). The document is addressed to all people and expresses hope for dialogue—a dialogue made possible by focusing on the human person. What inspires human hopes? What threatens human life? How is human dignity fostered? What do human communities need? What can human society provide? These are questions that launch a conversation.

The Church offers its own response—a response rooted in faith—but it also listens, engaging the world in dialogue and participating in building up the human family. The five specific areas of concern identified in the Pastoral Constitution remain as important today as they were in 1965: 1) marriage and family, 2) culture, 3) socio-economic life, 4) politics and 5) peace.

Sent in the Spirit

The Council’s other documents spell out and apply many of the principles articulated in these four constitutions. Some of these have been more significant than others. But behind them all move the spirit of the Council and the Spirit of Christ—the Spirit who calls all believers to participate actively in the life of faith, who reminds us of God’s desire for a personal relationship with humanity, who holds the Church together as the People of God, and who pushes us out into the world to serve.

In his hope-filled vision for the Year 2000, Pope John Paul II called the Second Vatican Council the great grace of the 20th century and the sure compass for the century now beginning. And so I return to that thick little paperback now sitting on my bookshelf, marked up with my student scribblings from St. Mary’s, its cover torn and its pages brittle. It remains a treasure for me. And its documents remain a treasure for the Church, words that inspire and point us into the new millennium.


NEXT: The Rapture
(by Michael Guinan, O.F.M.)

THE DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II

THE FOUR CONSTITUTIONS
• Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy
• Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation
• Dogmatic Constitution on the Church
• Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World

DOCUMENTS ON THE PEOPLE OF GOD
• Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church
• Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests
• Decree on the Training of Priests
• Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life
• Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People
• Decree on Ecumenism
• Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches

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