AMERICAN CATHOLIC COUNCIL

An Essay on Vatican II

A Look Back Almost 60 Years Later

by Robert Blair Kaiser

Pope John Paul II liked to describe the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council in terms that made it sound ponderously like an episcopal retreat, where the bishops spoke only in whispers and smiled sweet smiles at one another–when they weren't actually caught up in prayer for direct guidance from the Holy Spirit. The Council I saw, when I was covering it for Time magazine, was more like a battleground between fairly fierce factions-the missionary-minded reformers who were fighting to make their Church more relevant to the 20th century facing off against those led by the self-satisfied power elite inside the Roman Curia who tried to block every move they made.

In the process, the reformers brought a large measure of humanity to the Church's stuffy chambers, exercising something quite common in the early Church, but quite rare in the Church of Pius X, and Pius XI, and Pius XII – what we call in America freedom of speech. As a result, Catholics learned to see how the Church leadership made its most important decisions, not after some special revelations from on high, but in often-heated debate. Almost overnight, the Church was seen as less angelic and the men of the Church a lot more human.

The reformers took their cue from John XXIII, whose training was in history, not theology. The pope's chief theologian, Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, had the motto Semper Idem emblazoned on his coat of arms. But those who have read history know that the Church was not always the same. It was "in history," just as, come to think of it, Jesus was "in history."

Not long ago, I got a certain insight into the "non-historical orthodoxy" of the Curial mindset (Michael Novak coined the term some 40 years ago) when I read some remarks delivered at a conference in Milan by Cardinal Gianbattista Re concerning democracy in the Church. You guessed it: Re, a lifelong Vatican bureaucrat, was against it, because in a democracy the people are sovereign, while the Church, according to Re, is ruled by a pope whose authority is "instituted from above." Re explained that in the Church the people are protected from themselves by something he called "the hierarchical constitution of the Church" which, he said, "must not be seen as a limitation to the freedom and spontaneity of Christians, but as one more manifestation of God's mercy toward men." How so? Because, he said, that hierarchical constitution can remove the Church from the "variations, mutations and competitions" that occur "in history." In other words, if the people follow orders from Rome, they can be above history.

John XXIII didn't believe that he, or anyone else, was above history. Nor did he dare say the Church could never change. History gave him some perspective. So did his diplomatic postings before he became the patriarch of Venice (and then the pope), principally to Paris and to Istanbul. He knew about the Crusades, those so-called holy wars against the so-called infidel, and the bloody, inconclusive outcome of them all. And he told anyone who would listen that he didn't want to see any more Crusades, not even against communism. He wanted to end the era of "us-against-them." No more good guys against the bad guys.

At first, some of the Council Fathers didn't understand. Many bishops came to Rome with a long list of the things and the people in the world that needed condemning. "No, no," said the pope, "you do not understand. We do not want this council to condemn anyone or anything. We have had enough of saying no to the world. Now is the time we want to say yes." It was also a time when the pope wanted to give the Church back to the people. Those writing the Council's charter tried to do exactly that.

"Giving the Church to the people" may be an oversimplification, but I'd like to see if I can make a case that this was what the Council Fathers were aiming at. Here goes.

A Break from the Past?

In 1997, the producers of a television documentary asked men and women what Vatican II had meant to them. Answers were mostly euphoric. "If it weren't for Vatican II, the Church would be a museum," said a young man named Pablo Roma.

"If it weren't for Vatican II," said Fr. Virgil Elizondo, pastor of the cathedral in San Antonio, Texas, "you wouldn't see all those young people around the altar."

"If it weren't for Vatican II," said Therese Bonpane, director of the Office of the Americas in Los Angeles, "I might have continued living in the fear of God instead of with enthusiasms and a passion for life."

"If it weren't for Vatican II," said Dutch Theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, "I would have missed the most joyous days of my life."

These people, all Catholics, felt good about the Council because it had given them a new meaning and a new identity based not on prohibitions and fear, but on freedom and responsibility. They understood that their bishops, vicars of Christ in their own churches, had voted their enthusiastic support to the man who called them together, Pope John XXIII. They resonated to his optimistic, open definitions of what it meant to be on the road to salvation in the latter half of the century. "You do not have to be Catholics," the pope once told some Communists from Bologna, "as long as you are helping make a better world."

In 1962, Pope John XXIII asked some visiting Protestant monks from Taizé why they couldn't get together.

"We have different ideas," said their leader.

"Ideas, ideas!" he said. "What are ideas among friends?" The story was told over and over again around conciliar Rome, because it represented something new in Catholic history: a pope who believed that setting the Church apart from the rest of humankind was divisive, and, in a nuclear world, very dangerous as well.

But the message also fell on the negative ears of some embattled Catholics who had imbibed the dreads and the definitions that were fashioned by the gloomy Church they had known as kids. They didn't take the time and the effort to learn what the new Church stood for. They knew what the old Church stood for – as described by Edward R.F. Sheehan in his 1997 novel Cardinal Galsworthy:

…the little rituals and rubrics the fragrant puffs of incense at Solemn High Mass; the Communion fasts from midnight; abstinence from meat; fish on Fridays; black chasubles and the macabre and beautiful Dies Irae during Masses for the Dead; most of the penances and myriad privations, hoarded like squirrels' nuts and stored up inside the soul as treasure to be spent in heaven had best be junked because religion must be easier, more relevant, and chummy.

They thought the Council would ruin the Church they had known. And they had some allies in their alarm among many in the Church's central administration itself, who were still tied down by ways of thinking and acting that were more suited to a Church sitting in dry dock for the past century. They did not understand that the Council had launched the barque of Peter out on to the seas of the world a world where only Third World dictators exercised autocratic rule.

In the civilized West, authority operated in consultation with the people who were being served, and power was collaborative not absolute. By contrast, members of the Roman Curia were courtiers in strict obedience to a monarch who took his orders directly from God and wrote infallible rules for humankind. In his name, they broadcast those orders–in Latinover the face of the earth to almost a billion people, with the expectation those orders would be followed to the letter. They did not understand what the Council journey was all about, or did not want to understand once they realized where it was headed. Moreover, they took active steps to sabotage the expedition.

Pope Paul VI, the man who brought the Council to a close in 1965, spent the rest of his 13 years in the papacy dithering about the Council's democratic implications. In the leadership he enjoyed, he was never quite able to share responsibility in the implementation of the Church's new mission. His successor John Paul II was no better, even worse, for he spent most of his 25-year-pontificate dumbing the Council down. He translated the charter of Vatican II into a number of pietistic set-pieces that helped obscure the revolutionary message: that the Church is not a sect of the saved marching in lockstep to the pope's commands. Rather, it is a band of men and women in search of salvation, which, it would turn out, had more to do with becoming all that we can be in this life than what we were taught in our Baltimore Catechisms.

On February 27, 2000, Pope John Paul II addressed a closed symposium of theologians (selected because they tended to agree with him) to discuss the implementation of Vatican II. He told them, "If one reads the Council presuming that it marked a break with the past, while in reality it placed itself in line with the faith of all time, he definitely has gone astray." The pope was only reiterating a theme he had struck way back in 1985, when he explained that he had called an Extraordinary Synod "to celebrate and verify Vatican II."

In this 1985 synod, he started out badly by misquoting Pope John XXIII, who had said the Council's greatest concern was that "the sacred deposit of faith should be more effectively guarded and taught." John Paul reaffirmed that, period. He failed to add the rest of the quote: that "the salient point of this Council is not a discussion of one or another article of the fundamental doctrines of the Church…. For this a Council was not necessary." Instead, John XXIII said he wanted to make "a leap forward" into a place where the Church's best thinkers could reinterpret the Gospel for their own times because "the substance of the faith is one thing, but the way in which it is presented is another."

This may have been the most important sentence Pope John XXIII ever uttered. But Pope John Paul II left it out. He was revising by omission, while giving the Council the lip service it demanded. Not even a pope dare go against a Council, not openly, because, theoretically at least, ecumenical councils have the highest authority in the Church. As far as I can tell, John Paul II only used the word aggiornamento once—on October 11, 1987, the 25th anniversary of the Council's opening. But even there, he had to warn that this aggiornamento was to be "rightly understood and interpreted by the Magisterium." Meaning what? We understood John Paul's meaning by his actions; his updating always seemed to take a decidedly institutional turn. Shortly after he became pope, he called for an updating of the 1917 Code of Canon Law, and, in 1985, for a new Catechism of the Catholic Church—both emblematic of the kind of Church the pope had grown up with in Poland, a Church of laws, a Church that had all the answers.

If the truth were told, John Paul II was upset at the way the Council had been playing in places like The Netherlands. Peter Hebblethwaite saw his upset as a clash of two cultures. In his book on the 1985 synod, Hebblethwaite said, "The Dutch say what they think. They hate secrecy. They love democracy and freedom." For the pope, a Pole from a different culture, freedom was the rub.

Catholics in Poland had hardly started to think about the meaning of Vatican II, or what it might mean to their lives as thinking persons, and to the vitality of their worship. The Dutch were light years ahead of them. The Dutch were out of control. And the pope needed to be in control.

Five years before, in 1980, he had called the Dutch bishops to Rome in secret session (apologizing to the Dutch press for excluding them on the grounds that "the Church" i.e., the hierarchical Church "needs moments of exchange which take place in intimacy and discretion"). He gave the seven Dutch bishops 46 specific propositions that Dutch Catholics had to hold, or else. And he pulled their best selling Dutch Catechism out of circulation. For the following five years, he was also pulling their liberal bishops out of circulation, retiring them and replacing them with safer shepherds, i.e., men who had not been living in The Netherlands, but Dutch clerics he dug up in Ethiopia, Louvain and the Salesian Generalate in Rome.

Cut to the fall of 1985, when John Paul II called an Extraordinary Synod to put his own spin on the Council. In a book called La restaurazione di Papa Wojtyla, Gian Carlo Zizola, Rome's best Vatican reporter (a Vaticanista), called that spin a betrayal. Zizola said John Paul II was looking more and more like Pius X, who, early in the 20th century, had conducted a reign of terror over theologians he labeled as Modernists.

John Paul's 1985 Synod was marked by yet another step backward, another attempt to keep everyone in line, with the launching of a new Catechism of the Catholic Church, a project suggested by Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston that was finally completed in 1992. John Paul would have pulled back even more from the conciliar spirit than he did, except for the presence at the Synod of some stalwart bishops mainly from the U.S. and Canada and the British Isles, and a few northern European bishops, led by the cardinal-archbishop of Malines-Brussels, Godfried Danneels. But the Synod's final report reflected the theology and the ecclesiology of none other than Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, John Paul II's Grand Inquisitor. To Ratzinger, the world was now a much more dangerous place. The Prince of this world and the mystery of iniquity were still at work, he said, even in Catholic theologians who were "sowing confusion among the faithful."

The faithful might well have been confused. For centuries, in fact, ever since St. Augustine's 4th century, an awful lot of preachers insisted that we were all going to hell. They had a favorite phrase for the human race: massa damnata, "the damned mass." Pope John's Council reversed that pessimistic judgment when it declared that everyone, no matter what their faith or lack of faith, could achieve salvation if they followed their own consciences. This was something of a break from the past.

If John Paul didn't think so, then he was manifesting his ignorance about the history of his own Church. If he had gone back only one hundred years to the reign of Pius IX (1846-1878), he might have found that the shape of Catholicism had been dictated by the papacy's own long time push for control and by its frightened reactions when it started to lose that control. It was a thrust that was not informed by the faith, but by ecclesiastical politics, and secular politics as well. According to Leonard Swidler, ecumenist and author of more than two dozen books on the Church, "Most good theologians today have to spend half their time reading history in order to understand the half-baked origins of things that now pass for 'divine institution.'"

So, let's take a little side trip here into history. At the very least, we will understand that Vatican II was about the passing of power to the people of God, who learned from that Council how to wake up and grow up as Christians, with an ongoing mandate from the God who took flesh and dwelt among us to bring light and salience to a world that was already redeemed and didn't know it.

Power Passing to the People

In the autumn of 1962, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council journeyed to Rome from almost every nation on earth, a mixture of more than 2,500 bishops, archbishops, abbots and Eastern patriarchs, comprising a parliamentary body that would meet faithfully and argue freely every fall for the next four years. They heard some of the Church's most senior cardinals speaking more like Nathan Hale

than Torquemada, about the Church's need for selfless service, not their own prerogatives. They heard a learned cardinal from Bologna telling them the Church didn't have all the answers, that it was on a wandering, sweaty pilgrim-march through history. They heard another learned cardinal from the Roman Curia telling them that their scholars and preachers had to get back to the Church's Scriptural and historic roots. They heard an enlightened archbishop from Belgium telling them about the dangers of clericalism, and a humble archbishop from Brazil asking them to sell their diamond-and- ruby-encrusted chalices and give them to the poor. They heard a bishop from Marseilles telling them that Catholic France had lost the working class, and a Dutch missionary bishop from Indonesia reporting that the age of colonialism was over, even and especially for the Church, and a bishop from Bora Bora telling them that his people understood parables, but didn't understand (or much care about) papal infallibility.

Archbishop T.D. Roberts of Bombay told me, "They were saying things I'd always thought, but never dared utter." That gave him, and most of his confreres, the leave to speak out as they never had before, without fear, which never should have had a place in the Church in the first place. Fear didn't of course mark the early Church when it was born—at the first Pentecost. Only later, when the Church started becoming more of an empire than a family did the sycophantic Church emerge.

And as for the pope, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, John XXIII, well, they saw a jolly fellow who did not much believe in condemning the world, or crying havoc over it, but, rather, in loving it and trying to make it a better place for his nieces and nephews. He didn't want to keep the barque of Peter in dry dock much longer. "Scrape the barnacles of history off the bottom of this ship," he said, "and let's set sail and get the saving message of salvation out on to the seas of the world."

In the root sense of the word ecumenical, that is, worldwide, this may have been the first truly ecumenical Council in history. The ancient councils had not drawn delegates from the whole world, but from a tight circle of peoples clustered around the Mediterranean pond. Those councils had been councils of exclusion, called mostly to condemn or set aside those who would not submit to the Church's authority. There were, to be sure, bishops from Africa and Asia at Vatican I (1869-70). But they were missionary bishops from Europe, not native clergy. Vatican II marked the Church's first great discovery of itself as a world-Church. Exclusion was no longer the order of the day. The Church was expanding. It was inclusive. This Council could not have been in any sharper contrast to the two councils that preceded it, Vatican I and Council of Trent (1545-1563).

Vatican II reversed the defensiveness of Trent and vetoed the arrogance of Vatican I. Where the Council of Trent defined everything down to the last iota subscript of the least Greek footnote, Vatican II opened the way for Catholics to make what they wanted to make of the future. Where Vatican I abominated the contemporary world, Vatican II put its blessings on it. Vatican I assumed the culpability of heretics and non-Christians. Vatican II's popes hugged atheists and Moslems and assumed they were living in the grace of God. Vatican I insulted every Christian who wasn't a Roman. Vatican II opened its arms to them.

At Vatican II, Pope John XXIII himself checked the seating arrangements, and he found the Protestant observers stuck in a far corner of the conciliar aula inside St. Peter's Basilica. He moved them up to the best seats in the house and supplied each of them with personal mentors to whisper translations of the Latin speeches in their ears, and insisted that they not be called heretics and schismatics, but "separated brethren." By the end of the Council, they were not even as separated as many had believed, but members of the Church, by reason of their baptism. Some of the Council Fathers even suggested the Church canonize Martin Luther, a man just a little ahead of his time, because, 400 years before, he had called for many of the reforms then being considered at Vatican II. Some said this Council marked the end of the Counter Reformation. The pope even invited some Jews to come and observe and talk to him about what they were seeing and hearing.

Pope John said he hoped the Council would restore "the simple and pure lines that the face of the Church of Jesus had at its birth." The assumption, that earlier Christianity was somehow more pure than later Christianity and therefore closer to what Jesus wanted, went unchallenged. But no discussion seemed

necessary to those who were familiar with the accretions of history that had made the medieval Church and the Renaissance Church and the modern Church such a far cry from the Church of the catacombs.

Pope John's successor, Paul VI, rather liked the image of the Church as the barque of Peter that had lain in port for too long, its hull encrusted with barnacles, its sails in tatters, its instruments all covered with rust, its navigational maps and its ship's log lost somewhere in a mess under the captain's bunk. That barque, i.e., the Church, needed an overhaul, so it could do what it was doing in the first centuries of the Christian era, bringing the Good News of Christ's saving message to humankind. Early in the Council, Bishop Emile Josef DeSmedt of Bruges, Belgium, voiced a popular consensus concerning a plan for that overhaul. This Council should repeal the "clericalism, triumphalism and juridicism" that had marked the hierarchical Church for much of the second millennium. His speech late in the first session drew the loudest and longest applause at the Council.

The Council Fathers applauded DeSmedt because his ideas hit so close to the pope's prime intent, to bring the Church into the 20th century, which, if it was about anything, was about the passing of power, from old elite institutions to the people. Some may recall that "Power to the People" was a rallying cry during U.S. civil rights marches in the 1960s. But this idea wasn't conceived by Martin Luther King. It was planted early in the century during the bloody struggles of the U.S. labor movement, it germinated in the Bolshevik revolution, was watered in India by Mohandas Gandhi, and took root during World War II in the mind of a Lutheran minister named Dietrich Bonhoeffer who saw what the Nazis were doing to his country and told his people they had to resist, because they were part of "a world coming of age." When people come of age, they pass from one culture to another, from slavery where they have been the unthinking pawns of others, to freedom where they are acting persons in their own right. That is when power passes to the people as it did in the 20th century.

In the December 20, 1999, issue of Newsweek, Kenneth Auchincloss, reviewing the 20th century, put it this way:

'Elite' became a dirty word, and–for good or ill – authority in all its guises came under attack. Democracy, once a controversial form of government, became the norm to which pretty much everyone aspired. And though democracy's definition was often vague and its operation imperfect, as 2000 approached the world's people had a far greater say in their own governance than they did when the century began.

It would have been a surprise if the Council Fathers hadn't gotten caught up in that time-spirit by trying to see how and in what manner they could move the Church into a democratic age. With all the separated brethren sitting there in the conciliar aula wondering how the Church of John XXIII was going to deal with the issue of papal primacy, it seemed obvious enough where they should start. They had to cancel the absolutism of the most reactionary (and longest reigning) pope in history, Pius IX. They had to retool the Church's structure of governance.

This wouldn't be the first time in the history of the Church that its polity took a new form. After the Emperor Constantine granted favored status to the Church in the Edict of Milan in 313, the Church's rule shifted from democracy to follow an imperial model. In medieval times, the Church mirrored a feudal system, and by the time Church lawyers were finished writing new edicts for popes to sign during the Renaissance, they had enthroned the pope as a monarch. The Church–whatever its claims to "divine institution"–was not timeless and unchanging, but something that grew with humankind's ever-deepening knowledge of what that Church meant to them, and to the world around them, which kept changing.

Following that principle–adapting to its surroundings–the Church might well have changed its governance at about the same time that the colonies in America were breaking off from England to form a new democratic nation. The Church might have done so along the same democratic lines, except for the French Revolution which soon followed. The French, leaning on the same Enlightenment philosophers who had given U.S. patriots their theories of freedom, were in revolt from their oppressive king; they were also in revolt against a very oppressive Church. And so, when the revolutionaries started executing priests and nuns and confiscating Church property, it was understandable that the popes and their courtiers

would recoil from that world and withdraw into the papacy's most isolated and embattled era. Pope Gregory XVI (1831-1846) opposed Italian nationalism, freedom of conscience, freedom of the press, and the separation of Church and state. He also denounced and forbade the use of railways in the Papal States, and banned streetlights (so folk would not gather under them at night to plot against him).

Gregory's successor, Pius IX, simply vetoed the Enlightenment with his Syllabus of Errors in 1864, declaring anathema anyone who said that "the Roman Pontiff can and should reconcile and align himself with progress, liberalism and modern civilization." Pius IX had been hailed as a liberal himself when he was elected to the papacy in 1846, but he soon pulled back from that stance when he realized that the winds of freedom were beginning to blow in his own backyard. As the forces of the Italian Risorgimento threatened to invade his kingdom, which comprised most of the central Italian peninsula, he called the First Vatican Ecumenical Council, the first council since Trent, thinking that when such a supreme body as a council followed his wishes for it, he could thereby stave off the revolutionaries and, with the magical mantra of "infallibility," retain his temporal power. His push for a declaration from the Fathers of Vatican I that he was infallible sprang from a single need, to retain his personal rule over the Papal States. Could that infallibility stop the invaders? Pish tush. General Garibaldi's forces overwhelmed the papal troops, took Rome in a single day and scattered the Council Fathers who hadn't already quit Rome.

An Anachronistic Papacy

One scene helps epitomize Vatican I. During a key debate there on infallibility, Archbishop Josef Strossmayer of Bosnia and Herzogovina made a mistake: he spoke well of Protestants. The Council president rang a bell and said, "This is not the place to praise Protestants." (The place was St. Peter's Basilica, built from the sale of indulgences; when Martin Luther first beheld St. Peter's early in the 16th century, he began thinking about the Church's need for reform. The rest was history. The Church condemned him, and it has been battling Luther and Protestants ever since.) Strossmayer objected to the put-down. Protestants, he said, were acting in good faith. Now, throatier members of the majority started shouting him off the podium. One called out, "He is Lucifer, anathema, anathema." And another screamed, "He is another Luther. Let him be cast out." An English translation of the official Latin transcript of that session has everyone then shouting, "Come down! Come down!"

"I protest! I protest!" cried Strossmayer. But he came down.

Strossmayer was the best theologian among the thousand bishops at Vatican I. (A vast majority of them hailed from Western Europe, and a majority of them from Italy.) He and some of the several hundred bishops in the minority knew that a declaration of the pope's infallibility was very bad for the Church. Infallibility not only said the pope was infallible, but that all the popes of history were infallible, too. A declaration now would only enhance papal responsibility for the discredited acts of the buried and repented past. Often enough, popes launched these initiatives with often-ditzy pronouncements, called "bulls." Lord Acton named some of them:

The Bulls which imposed a belief in the deposing power, the Bulls which prescribed the tortures and kindled the flames of the Inquisition, the Bulls which erected witchcraft into a system and made the extermination of witches a frightful reality, would become as venerable as the decrees of Nicaea, as incontrovertible as the writing of S. Luke…. And the sentences of every Protestant judge (by the Bull Cum ex Apostolatus Officio) would be invalid.

The author of these lines was one of the most fascinating figures at Vatican I. Sir John Emerich Edward Dalberg, a man with blood ties to the nobility of two European nations, as well as England. In the bull Cum ex Apostolatus Officio, Pope Pius V had excommunicated Queen Elizabeth, declared her a non-queen, and told the English people they no longer owed her loyalty and civil obedience.

Naturally enough, the Queen's good servants made English Catholics pay for the pope's blather by launching a bloody persecution that lasted for decades. Dozens of English Jesuits felt the uncomfortable effects of Pius V's asinine act. They were hanged, drawn and quartered.

Lord Acton descended from the small remnant that survived Pius V's destruction of the Catholic Church in England, which helps explain why, though he was only 36 at the time, Acton helped lead the anti-infallibility faction at Vatican I. Not only did he write secret news dispatches out of Rome, first printed in the Augsburg Allegemeine Zeitung under the soubriquet, Quirinus, he even wrote speeches for some of the Council Fathers who didn't think it opportune for the pope and his loyalists to dictate a new doctrine in the Church. When one of the bishops dared point out that the doctrine had no precedent in ancient Church tradition, Pius IX exploded. Traditio sono io, he said. "I am tradition." And then he added, Sono io la chiesa. "I am the Church."

Acton and the minority bishops had more perspective than the pope did, and they knew what was driving him: his acute need to preserve the temporal power of the papacy. They also knew what lay behind that desire–something that Pius IX had not picked up from Scripture but from the crowned heads of Europe, who assured him that he, like they, ruled absolutely, by divine right. Of these popes, Lord Acton was moved to observe, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Most great men are also bad men." To Acton, Pius IX was a bad man. One can only imagine how Acton might have felt had he been present in St. Peter's Square on September 3, 2000, when Pius IX was beatified by his ultramontane admirer from Poland, John Paul II.

Pius IX a bad man? Perhaps not bad. But he had more than several idiotic moments. In his Papal Sin, Garry Wills has detailed one of Pius IX's extended follies–his adoption of a Jewish lad, Edgardo Mortara, who was baptized by a Catholic maid without his parent's knowledge, and, on that basis, taken from his parents and hidden in the papal household, never to see his parents again.

Another loony tune in the Pio Nono Hit Parade came wafting out of Vatican I–the story told by the Greek Melkite Patriarch Gregor Yussuf who was himself summoned to the papal chambers to answer to Pius IX, angry at the patriarch's vocal opposition on infallibility. When Yussuf kissed the foot of the pope in the traditional fashion, the pope placed his other, slippered foot on the patriarch's head like a pagan conqueror, and said, "Gregor, you hard head, you." Then he rubbed his foot about on the patriarch's head a while longer. After Pius died, the Holy Synod of the Greek-Melkite Church filed two separate reports of this event in Rome to order to block any future attempt to canonize Pius IX. (This story comes from August Bernhard Hasler, How the Pope Became Infallible. Hans Küng's praise of Hasler's book in a jacket blurb only served to anger those in the Roman Curia who were after Küng.)

Yussuf was not alone in his anger. Many of the bishops at Vatican I left Rome in protest over the pressure they were getting from the pope. On July 13, 1870, only 601 remained to vote in secret on the decree, Pastor Aeternus, though 1054 were eligible. Those voting placet (yes) numbered 451, those voting non placet: 88; some 62 voted yes with reservations, that is to say, if they could modify the wording of the decree (which defined the pope's primacy as well as his infallibility), they might vote yes. Here is Richard McBrien's account of what the decree meant:

It gave the pope "full and supreme power of jurisdiction over the whole Church, not only in matters that pertain to faith and morals, but also in matters that pertain to the discipline and government of the Church throughout the whole world." This power is "ordinary [i.e., not delegated] and immediate [i.e., not exercised over some other party] over each and every Church [and] over each and every shepherd and faithful."

Regarding infallibility: "It is a divinely revealed dogma that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks ex cathedra, that is, when acting in the office of shepherd and teacher of all Christians, he defines, by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the universal Church, that possesses through the divine assistance promised to him in the person of Blessed Peter, the infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to be endowed in defining the doctrine concerning faith or morals; and that such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are therefore, irreformable of themselves, not because of the consent of the Church.

The bishops voted again on the same matter five days later in a public session, with each Council Father shouting his placet in a ceremony where a storm added to the high drama. Each yes vote seemed to be delivered to the accompaniment of a flash of lightning, followed by a bolt of thunder, while the pope himself added up the votes by the light of a taper inside a dim St. Peter's.

The very next day, the forces of the Italian Risorgimento marched into Rome. The pope suspended the Council in mid-course, and fled his Quirinal Palace. He retreated in pouting isolation to a 107-acre kingdom across the Tiber and became a self-styled "prisoner in the Vatican." He had lost most of the papacy's temporal power, but, thus embattled, ascribed an absolute spiritual power for himself and for his successors that made the papacy, as defined in Aeternus Pastor, even more of an anachronism.

According to Richard McBrien, "No definitions could have been further removed from the teaching of the Council of Constance (1414-18), from the theology and practice of the Eastern Churches, and from the practice of the universal Church, West and East alike, of the first Christian millennium." After Vatican I, a significant number of Catholics who had opposed infallibility left the Church.

Long after monarchy had died, the popes of the late 20th century were still monarchs. They were the last absolute monarchs in the world, laying down laws people could not follow, because they were couched in authoritarian terms that were alien to moderns who had learned (from watching Hitler's Germany, for example) not to follow blindly whatever those in power told them to think and do.

The Fathers of Vatican II were leaning on a theology that was called "Incarnational," something worked out by four of the Council's brightest theologians, Yves Congar, M.D. Chenu, Edward Schillebeeckx (all three Dominicans), and the Jesuit Karl Rahner. These men were coming to see that the Church was always growing, and must grow, in all modesty, if it was going to carry Christ's message to the people of our time. History was speaking to the Fathers of the Council, if they cared to listen "to the signs of the times" (as Pope John XXIII had suggested they do). That kind of listening would not only help the Church update itself in the early 1960s, but it would set a new style of thinking that would make it easier for the Church to keep doing so in the future.

The World Press: Breaking Down the Papal Myth

One of the signs of the times at this Council: the presence of hundreds of reporters, representing newspapers and magazines and radio and television stations from around the world. This startled the bishops. They were making news, and it wasn't news for the Saturday church page, it was front page news. They weren't quite sure why. Was it the rarity of a council? The fact that ecumenical councils happened so infrequently? Yes. But that wasn't enough to draw this kind of press crowd.

Was it the revolutionary nature of their message? No. So far, the bishops had not come up with any calls, explicit or implicit, for revolution. Maybe it was the spectacle itself, of an institution once thought unchangeable setting out quite deliberately to update itself to a world which, since Vatican I, had undergone more changes than it had in the entire history of the planet. If this ancient Church was trying to get in step with that world, then this might be a show worth watching. That is what I told my editors at Time and that is what many of them came to believe.

That belief had a resonance inside the Vatican and inside the Council as well. The Fathers of the Council knew their words and their ways were being watched-primarily by the world press, and, more importantly, through the press, by the people of the world. Time magazine (hardly a Catholic magazine) took an early lead in delivering those expectations through a series of stories on the Council, beginning with a cover story on Pope John XXIII that praised him for the aggiornamento he had set in motion. Time expected these bishops to do something, and, largely unconscious that they were reacting to Time (or, indeed, to any press organ), they set to the task of doing it. On Wednesdays, we were told, the bishops were seen passing copies of that week's Time up and down the aisles of the stadium seats that had been erected in the middle of St. Peter's Basilica.

We had to be told, because no members of the press were allowed inside; the pope's courtiers thought the Council was only "the Church's business," and they were right about that, except that their definition of "the Church" was becoming obsolete. "The Church" would soon include everybody. But the Vatican bureaucrats didn't understand. They went on doing what came naturally. They tried to keep the reality under wraps. They set up the Council as a secret meeting (and they made it even more inaccessible, even to many of the bishops inside, by ordering that all the speeches be delivered in Latin).

But the Council soon became an open affair, thanks mainly to some hard working reporters and their allies among theology professors and men and women from missionary orders stationed in Rome, and from the liberal theologians who had come to the Council with their bishops. One ambitious missionary type, Ralph Wiltgen, an American from the Society of the Divine Word, scurried about Rome after every Council session and was able to collect complete texts of the day's most important speeches from the bishops who delivered them, mimeograph them, and distribute them to the reporters-in six languages.

Reporting from the secular press soon told the world the hitherto hidden truth: that the pope and the bishops made up their minds through discussion and debate and compromise and consensus-like any parliamentary body anywhere. This stunned Catholics around the world. All their lives, they had believed that Catholic truth came directly from God to the pope on a special hot line. When the myth broke down, the people began to grow up. The process took some time. (In some places, the demythologization of the papacy is still going on.) The Council was almost over before much of the Catholic press, which had had priest-reporters inside the Council all along, got over their surprise sufficiently to start reporting the facts, that the pope's presumed direct pipeline to God didn't exist. As far as they could see, the pope was getting his revelations from his bishops, who, presumably, were more in touch with their people than he was.

In that sense, the most revolutionary thing about the Council was the presence of the press, which needed to know what was happening inside the walls of St. Peter's and would do so, despite the best efforts of the Roman Curia to keep them uninformed. The leaders of previous councils had tried to keep their meetings secret because they didn't want the kings and princes of Europe to know what they were doing. During much of Europe's history in the second millennium, the Church (and particularly the papacy) was a political pawn. In July 1809, Napoleon kidnapped Pope Pius VII and kept him prisoner at a town near Paris for six years. So, the less the Napoleons of this world knew, the better. Knowledge then, as now, was power.

But members of the Roman Curia wanted to keep this Council secret for a different reason. The Council was their thing, and those on the outside didn't need to know what was happening inside. When the Church (i.e., the institutional Church) made up its mind, the people would know. Making the Council open to the people would have been a Curial concession to the notion that the people had a stake in what was happening, and a right to express their opinion about it as well. Curialists maintained that press access would destroy the freedom and autonomy of the Council.

There was, however, another ancient canon in the Church that said, "What concerns all should be discussed and approved by all." The world's press ended up helping millions of Christians (and others) to know what the Council Fathers were saying, even if it fell somewhat short of telling them what it all meant. As a result, the Council's doings made special news for four years. In the Council's first year, despite the Curial secrecy, I managed to do four cover stories for Time showing a Council that was reaching out to the people of God. By the end of the Council, in December 1965, the Council Fathers had produced sixteen conciliar documents, in effect, a new charter that would make the Church less clerical, less legalistic, more human, more humble, less satisfied with itself, and at its higher reaches at least, more collaborative in its governance. They came very close, in fact, to reestablishing the democracy that had marked the Church's first several hundred years, when bishops (including the bishop of Rome) were elected, and presiders over the liturgy were selected out of (and by) the community of believers.

Given the preponderance of bishops at the Council who had been brainwashed with the seminary slogan, "the Church is not a democracy, you know," it would have been too much, perhaps, to expect the Council

to use the term democracy. John Paul II said repeatedly, “The Church is not a democracy.” According to one Roman wag, he said it 1487 times. In some Church circles democracy is still a dirty word. When Chile was struggling to make the transition from the dictatorship of Auguste Pinochet to modern democracy, the cardinal-archbishop of Santiago, Jorge Arturo Medina Estévez, voiced doubts about the project. On August 3, 1990, he said, “The fact that democracy exists does not automatically mean that God would want it to be put into practice.”

Editors of the conciliar texts contented themselves with a Latin term that might sell better than the word democracy, because it did not carry any political connotations. They used the obscure Latin communio, and a Greek word, diakonia, terms which, taken together, come closer to the concept of “a family whose primary function is to serve.” Quite rightly, the Council theologians were not thinking of the Church as any kind of government, much less a temporal power. Their Church was a community of loving persons, “a radically different kind of community from the state, different in origin, purpose, history, identity, inner dynamic and destiny.” (The quote comes from Fr. James A. Coriden, a former president of the Canon Law Society of America, in his “Canonical Doctrine of Reception,” a pamphlet published in 1998 by the Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church.)

Through history, that community of loving persons had gone through a variety of incarnations, and it now had a structure of governance that needed updating, like practically everything else in the panoply of the Church’s rules and regulations. The Council found another word to describe the kind of joint power-sharing that would occur within this family-in-service: it was a concept called collegiality, one that also needed a good deal of explanation.

In its prime conciliar sense, collegiality at Vatican II referred to the cooperative, collaborative, consultative relationship that should mark the relationship between the pope and the bishops. In an extended sense, that collaborative style should also extend to all the members of the Church bishops with their priests, and priests with their people-so that a geometer would no longer imagine this new communio/diakonia as a pyramid, but a circle.

The Fathers of Vatican II found various ways of tearing down that old pyramidal structure. They would try to deal with DeSmedt’s charge, that the Church was too clerical, for instance, by insisting on the radical equality of all believers in a way other councils never dreamed of doing. They said there is one basic priesthood in the Church that everyone receives in baptism, and that both ordained and baptismal priesthoods share in this one priesthood. In fact, if we read carefully in the Acts of the Apostles, we can see that the notion of the priesthood of the community is older than the concept of an ordained ministry. As a result, ministry could well become more inclusive in its exercise as the Church’s members plunge into collaborative ministries together, each exercising their own gifts.

As I will try to demonstrate shortly, the Council Fathers would take a new look at power in the Church: only legitimate when that power was exercised in service to the community and to the world. And that notion applied to everyone: pope, bishops, priests, and people. The pope would still be the pope, to be sure, and the bishops would still be bishops. But the power of the pope was not an absolute one. To serve well, he had to listen to his bishops. And together they would have to listen to the people of God and to its most prophetic voices.

Who Is the Church?

The Council’s first session began as very much of a churchy affair, but changed course late in its first session in 1962 when Leo Josef Suenens, the cardinal-archbishop of Malines-Brussels, proposed that the Church had to find new ways of relating to the real world. Those writing a new document on the Church’s internal governance began the unprecedented task of writing another on the Church’s relationship to the world outside. The texts of both documents themselves reflected a new view of Church. If there was a radically equal relationship now between all Christians, by reason of their baptism, then the Church was not to be defined as clerical, much less hierarchical. The Church was “the people of God” and they would

not only pursue their work as Christians inside the walls of this church or that cathedral. They would be men and women in the world, at the service of the world. They would "complete creation."

This was an idea that first came flashing across the Catholic world in 1950, expressed first in "Growth or Decline," a pastoral letter written by Emmanuel Suhard, the cardinal-archbishop of Paris. Suenens and a team of theologians from western Europe had been meditating on it ever since. Suhard wrote:

Being an apostle means taking on everything and penetrating everything belonging to man and the world he has made . . . to extend the benefits of the Redemption to the whole created world. The Christian has not only the right but the duty to complete creation and then make of that an offering to the Creator. To convert the world, it is not enough to be a saint and to preach the gospel; or rather, it is not possible to be a saint and invoke the gospel we preach without doing all we can to assure for all men conditions of work, housing, food, rest and human culture without which life ceases to be human.

"Completing creation." Such a task, said Cardinal Suhard, would not be easy, nor could it be done in a generation or two. But it would have to be done by men and women who not only had faith, but competence as well, because their job was to help remake society, to join the world's movers and shakers in the task of making life more free, more responsible, more loving, more human. It was a new definition of holiness, and Christians couldn't put it on as easily as a priest puts on his Roman collar, or a monk his habit. Everyone in the Church was called to holiness (or to use a less pious word, to service). But it wasn't a formula, or a set of belief-propositions, or a matter of taking a vow, or even an oath, like Pius X's oath against Modernism.

The Church as "the people of God" didn't always have all the answers, but they dared to search for them, as members of a Church that was now less stuffy, less mysterious. Now it was "a pilgrim Church." Two conciliar documents contain the outlines of this idea: Lumen Gentium, Chapter Two, on the people of God, and the entire text of Gaudium et Spes, on the Church in the Modern World. Quite a reversal. Before the Council, many Catholics imagined that the Church (i.e., the official, hierarchical Church) made its always unchallengeable, if not infallible, decisions after God spoke to the pope and the pope spoke to the bishops and the bishops spoke to the priests and the priests spoke to the nuns and the nuns spoke to the people. And always with certainty.

This once-Godly pyramid, with an absolute monarch sitting on its apex, couldn't work any longer. Alain Woodrow put it eloquently:

This theological vision of the pope as an absolute monarch is not only contrary to the Gospel, it is impossible to put into practice. Contrary to the Gospel, because it leads to an excessively centralized, bureaucratic Church, which tries to control every aspect of Christian life from a narrow European, and even Roman, point of view. Born in the Middle East, the Gospel is increasingly imprisoned in the narrow confines of a Western, Latin vision of the world… and the juridical strait-jacket of Roman Canon Law. Impossible to put in practice, because a single man cannot run a worldwide Church of 976 million people [now more than a billion] and, as in all autocratic, non-democratic institutions, the pope's administration (the Curia) is tempted to speak in his name, often without his knowledge. (From a 1998 essay by Alain Woodrow, "Superstar or Servant," in Gary MacEoin, ed., The Papacy and the People of God.)

A monarchical Church cannot complete creation. One pope cannot do it. A billion Catholics working together might be able to chip away at it, each in their own way, in their own communities, in their own time – if they were encouraged to think about their shared responsibilities for history and for one another. The U.S. journalist John Cogley summed up the new spirit in one of his famous Poems on Postcards:

Who Is The Church?
Who?
You.

Vernacular Values

We saw that new spirit enlivening many of the conciliar documents. The Council's first debate, on the liturgy, highlighted the notion that the sacraments were for the people, even that most solemn part of Mass (actually then called the Secret) that the priest had, up to now, been saying quietly to himself. Since the days of its early history in Rome, the Western Church had administered the sacraments in Latin. Now, the Fathers of the Council were asked to consider allowing the Mass in the vernacular–in everything from English to Urdu to Swahili. That put the traditionalists on the attack. How could the universal Church turn its back on tradition? It had celebrated Mass in Latin for 2000 years. Those seeking change stood their ground: only the western or Roman Church used Latin. The Mass was meant for all; it should be understood by all.

The Fathers debated the question for more than a month. When the Council presidents finally added up a preliminary vote, members of the press who had been following the debate by reading releases by the Vatican Press Office were stunned. The traditionalists had less than 200 votes, the liberals more than 2,000. I call them traditionalist and not conservative, because they were self-styled conservatives who were on a course that wouldn't conserve much, except the recent and corrosive traditions of the past century. Archbishop John Quinn had the same distinction to make about reform movements at the Council versus the reform movements that made their appearance under the reign of John Paul II. Quinn said that conciliar reformers "derived their inspiration from a deeper study of the Bible, the Fathers and Church history. They were also inspired by an analysis of the existing pastoral situation of the Church in the light of these sources. The contemporary anti-reform movements do not emphasize the sources–Scripture, the Fathers, etc. They emphasize 'tradition' and call themselves 'traditionalists,' but it is in the narrow sense of what has happened in the last 150 years, or, at most, the last 400 years."

The Council had struck a blow for the people, because, as one of the theologians had pointed out, Latin was the language of the elite, and the vernacular was the language of the people. But this wasn't simply a debate over language. "Vernacular" has a larger philosophical and sociological meaning. It is a concept that can also stand for whatever is homebred, homespun, homegrown, and homemade–which is one reason why the centralizing Roman minds opposed the vernacular. For centuries, the Church had been engaged in a centralizing and expropriating control–and it was a process that had only gotten more outrageous over time. Allowing the Church's worship in the vernacular would reverse that centralizing process, of not only worship, but of power in many other areas as well. Those who resisted the vernacular were implicitly resisting a shift of power in the Church, power to the people.

The late Msgr. Ivan Illich, one of the 20th century's most original minds, pointed this out in a book of essays entitled Shadow Work. In one of those essays, "Vernacular Values," he discussed the role of a Spanish grammarian, Elio Antonio de Nebrija, who in 1492 presented to Queen Isabella a grammar of the Castilian language, with the express purpose of providing her with a new instrument of imperial domination. Illich interprets Nebrija as a forerunner of the modern age, in which the business of government (including Church government) is expropriation. Governments take away from people what they can create for themselves (in this case, ordinary speech) and force them to take it back in a transformed version, the standardized language taught by formal educators. The expropriation of language, said Illich, foreshadowed all later expropriations, each of which drove people further in the direction of helplessness and dependence. (There was nothing more standardized, of course, than the Church's official books of prayer and the Church's official theological handbooks, in just these exact Latin words and no other.)

Encouraging people everywhere to worship in their own language was, then, a revolutionary move very much in keeping with other liberations of the century. It was revolutionary because the hierarchical Church was abdicating a long-presumed right to impose its dominance over the people in the provinces. Some said the bishops had joined the human race.

Scripture: New Interpretive Power

The debate on the liturgy foreshadowed other conciliar debates dealing with the key question of how much power the center would continue to exercise over the periphery.

In the Council's second debate, on Revelation, the people won again, when a majority of the Fathers voted to let the Church's Biblical scholars do their work. This meant they could now help the people of God understand how radical a document the Bible really was. Many modern Scriptural scholars believe that the Bible takes a principled stand against the domination of the many by the few. More than anything else, the Bible is about liberation. As a young scholar in Harvard's School of Divinity wrote to me:

But Biblical scholarship can help in that struggle-our struggle, I think-for the recovery of Jesus' mission of freedom and liberation. It can unmask the misrepresentations that are used every day by the hierarchs as a kind of hermeneutical shield for their eternal scheme, which is, of course, maximizing their own power and deflecting the power of the rest of the Church.

For years, Catholic Biblical scholars were forbidden to use the modern methods of literary research to help them understand the entire canon of scripture (which, of course, was written by men from ancient cultures for people of their own time and place). In 1943, Pope Pius XII removed those restrictions, thereby freeing up the scholars to help people understand the Bible in all the variety of its literary forms. Again, it was an example of serving the people with what they needed-if they were to understand revelation at all. But at the Council, the forces of Roman reaction launched an assault on the Biblical scholars and their work, even daring to incorporate that attack in a draft document "On Revelation." If that document had passed a conciliar vote, the scholars would have found their hands tied once more — not by the power of reason, but by the power of power.

Fortunately, Pope John XXIII understood what was afoot. In his opening keynote speech to the Council on October 11, 1962, John told the bishops he would have the Council "take a step forward toward a deeper penetration and developing realization of the faith… through modern research and scholarly disciplines." In 1907, at the height of the Church's anti-modernist crisis, one Jesuit scholar from England, George Tyrrell, was forced out of his order and out of the Church for saying what John XXIII would tell the Fathers of Vatican II in 1962-to reformulate Catholic doctrine "in such a way that is adapted to our own times." Others could guard the faith like an ancient heirloom. Pope John wanted Church scholars free to pursue new formulations, because (almost an exact paraphrase of what George Tyrrell had been condemned for saying): "The substance of the faith is one thing. The way in which it is presented is quite another."

The conclusion was clear: Catholic scholars had a duty to be relevant to their own culture, speaking to men and women in language they could understand. Catholic intellectuals, who were amazed and delighted to hear words like this from a pope, drew an unmistakable corollary that the meaning of any statement of doctrine is always open to interpretation, never finally captured in any particular form of expression for all times and for all cultures. In a real sense, then, the Council accorded legitimacy to the subjective interpretation of religious truth.

In the Council's Constitution on Revelation, the Fathers said:

There is a growth in understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure things in their hearts, through the intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth.

For a full century before the Council, there was no room in the Church for any interpretation at all, not even by those bishops who received "the sure gift of truth… by episcopal succession." Now the Council was showing the faithful a tolerance toward different theological approaches that were once forbidden.

That same Constitution on Revelation had this passage regarding the inerrancy of scripture:

Since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.

Michael Cuneo, a Catholic scholar from Fordham, noted, “At first glance, this seems entirely unremarkable… If we look again, however, a more complex scenario comes into view. The Bible apparently teaches ‘without error,’ but only does so compellingly when dealing with matters vital to salvation. But… who is to decide (and by what criteria) what is essential for salvation?” The practical effect, said Cuneo, provided Catholic theologians interpretive power over scriptural texts already enjoyed by their Protestant counterparts. (See Cuneo’s The Smoke of Satan.)

In effect, the Council was saluting traditional theological positions, but it also suggested “rich possibilities for theological innovation.” To Cuneo, the Council’s take on Scripture was “the Church’s passport to the modern world.”

With that passport, Catholic scholars were now free to enlist the Church in contemporary causes that would have been unthinkable in pre-conciliar Catholicism. My friend at Harvard Divinity, Tom Conry, wrote me:

The tactic of the authoritarian, fascist wing of the church has been to appropriate and distort the scripture and tradition. Our reluctance or simple inability to mount an effective defense against this tactic has given the erroneous but disastrous impression to much of the world that the Bible is on the side of the oppression of women, of autocracy and despotism, of every sort of repressive structure. The hierarchs know that this impression is absolutely crucial to their project; that is why they fight so ferociously for their power to define what is read, who will read, what pronouns will be read, etc.

Putting a Gloss on Collegiality

In the Council’s third major debate, the Fathers had to confront what they called “the unfinished business of Vatican I” to try to right the overbalanced, embarrassing and unhistorical declaration made by the Fathers of Vatican I that when popes speak solemnly on matters of faith and morals, they do so infallibly, and have always done so. Those representing the majority wing at Vatican II told themselves they could best complete the work of Vatican I by defining the infallibility of the Church, rather than the infallibility of the pope. (The word “completed” was a way of not offending the memory of a former pope, no matter how much he really deserved having his memory offended.) And they made a very good stab at it with their Chapter Three of the schema De Ecclesia, a document that would later be called Lumen Gentium.

It was a redefinition that could have led to a further power shift, from the center to the periphery, with every member of the Church getting into a more collaborative mode. At Vatican II, some of the Fathers were quoting Cardinal John Henry Newman’s brilliant essay, written in 1859 for Lord Acton’s Rambler, “On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine.” In that essay, Newman asserted a long Christian tradition that, through the centuries, God guides and preserves the whole Church, and that prophetic lay voices often guide the Church as it pursues its way through time. Newman recalled the celebrated history of the Arian controversy in the early Church, when the pope and the bishops were off in heresy on the question of the divinity of Christ, while the people were faithful. In effect, the teaching on the divinity of Christ was maintained and preserved far more by the laity of the time than by the pope and the bishops at the Council of Nicaea. Wrote Newman:

I think certainly that the Ecclesia docens [the teaching Church] is more happy when she has such enthusiastic partisans about her… than when she cuts off the faithful from the study of her divine doctrines and the sympathy of her divine contemplations, and requires from them a fides implicita in her word, which in the educated classes will terminate in indifference, and in the poorer in superstition.

To the Council’s credit, it even cited Newman, the Church’s most famous convert of the 19th century, in Chapter Two of Lumen Gentium, on the people of God. In the general voting for Lumen Gentium, more than 90 percent of the 2,200 bishops were lined up to go with the majority’s view of collegiality, namely that “the College of Bishops, whose head is the Supreme Pontiff and whose members are the bishops, is also the subject of supreme and full power over the universal Church. The College of Bishops exercises power over the universal Church in a solemn manner in an ecumenical council.”

But the traditionalists in the minority couldn't abide any lessening of the pope's absolute authority–even though, if one went back far enough in history, one could find a time when the pope was hardly the absolute ruler he became in the 19th century. Toward the very end of the Council's Third Session, they prevailed upon Pope Paul VI, who had taken over the helm of Peter's barque from John XXIII to bring the Council to a close. At that moment, in mid-November 1964, just before the final vote on Lumen Gentium, principals from the Roman Curia brought to the pope a draft of a document laced with juridical specificity–four points, a kind of pre-note, that added up to this: that the bishops were never a college without the pope, and could never act without the pope at their head. Paul VI listened to the minority opinion–no more than 328 votes against 1907 on the other side–because he wanted unanimity on this issue. He had no doubt about the rightness of the majority opinion. But he didn't want the semperidems in his own Curia to undermine the rest of the Council's work. There were other fish to fry. A document on ecumenism and another on religious liberty had drawn vociferous opposition and, like a president trying to get some favorite bills through Congress, he wanted to buy time. So the pope allowed the minority, no-change faction to put a gloss on the collegiality of the bishops that would make it almost meaningless.

The Church's move toward collegiality was, thus, blunted by supporters of the old absolutism many of whom had hitched their ecclesiastic careers to an all-powerful pope. Leonard Swidler commented, "Papal supporters, because they are in possession of power, will be impervious to all theoretical arguments against papal power; this is not to accuse them of being evil men–only of being men." It really didn't matter. As Hans Küng has pointed out, the pope "is supposed to use his infallible teaching office in relation to the Church, for the building up and for the good of the Church as a whole. But he and he alone (together with his court, of course) can decide from one case to the next what is for the good of the Church… No one in the Church can prevent him from acting willfully and arbitrarily…. [I]f he wants, the pope can do everything, even without the Church." In his 25 year reign, John Paul II did exactly that.

Losing the battle over collegiality at Vatican II took the edge off all the victories of the Council majority, and it would point up a weakness in the system that the men in the Curia would continue to exploit. The Council majority won all the often bitter legislative battles over those committed to preserving the dominance of the Vatican on every issue facing the Church in the 21st century. Unfortunately, the minority didn't give up, and, "by dint of sheer dogged committee work," succeeded in reinserting minority positions back into every text they could. Those positions, which had been ignominiously abandoned, would find their way back into various constitutions and decrees." (See Giuseppe Alberigo, Jean-Pierre Jossua and Joseph A. Komonchak, eds.,The Reception of Vatican II.)

As a result, there has been an insoluble conflict in the postconciliar Church between the majority's apparent intentions and the Council's actual text. Partisans can appeal, therefore, either to 'the spirit of Vatican II'–in effect, to its legislative history–or to its actual language. For 25 years, naturally enough, members of the Roman Curia have been appealing to its actual language, and, since they were the ones who were writing the pope's speeches, homilies, allocutios, apostolic letters and encyclicals, the pope tended to take the same tack as he careered along on his course of Restoration. In many cases, John Paul II didn't feel any need to justify his unilateral moves. He simply bulled his way ahead, imposing unwelcome bishops on the people they were supposed to be serving, issuing more dogmatic encyclicals, approving investigations into the work of suspect theologians, making more calls to order (as he did in the apostolic letters Ad Tuendam Fidem, to punish dissent, and Apostolos Suos, to keep episcopal conferences in their place), acting for all the world like, what? An absolute ruler? Yes.

Collegiality? There is no evidence that John Paul II ever gave it much of a thought. In August 1999, the retired cardinal-archbishop of Toronto, Emmett Carter, then 87, told me, "The pope used to nod and tell me I was right; he should consult more with his bishops. But he never did." In 17 episcopal synods, bishops were brought to Rome to rubber-stamp whatever John Paul II wanted. They often found their own ideas ignored.

Gaudium et Spes: The Council's Crowning Document

In the last days of the Council, despite all the politicking in the corridors of the Vatican, the Council liberals came up smiling. A year before, in December 1964, Hans Küng had been called on the carpet at the Holy Office after his open criticism of Pope Paul (for declaring Mary the Mother of the Church without consulting anyone, though the declaration had little justification in tradition and, because it seemed to exalt Mary in ways that could only puzzle the "separated brethren" at the Council).

But in December 1965, Küng was pleased at what the Fathers of Vatican II had been able to accomplish. They moved the Church into the mainstream of history. They got the declarations they wanted on religious liberty, putting the Church's blessings on not only religious freedom, but on freedom of conscience as well. They repealed Pio Nono's "error has no rights," not by talking about error, which was an abstraction, but by talking about real people who certainly did have rights–among those rights the right to worship God (or not worship God) according to their own inspirations. They got their decree on ecumenism, pointing out that the truth of Christ should make men and women free and open to whatever was good in every legitimate religion, because all paths lead to God. To be authentically Christian, Christians had to stop being enslaved to their tribal forms of Christianity. In particular, they had to recall their Jewish roots and remember that Jews are still God's chosen people. And they needed to turn aside from their old militant missionary mindset, that they were called to convert people of other religions to "the one, true faith." If Catholics could only bear witness to Jesus Christ in their own lives, and encourage Moslems and Hindus, for example, to be better Moslems and Hindus, the world would be a more peaceful place.

And they won virtually unanimous endorsement of the Council's last crowning document, Gaudium et Spes, which challenged Catholics to drop holdover beliefs that came more from an ancient heresy called Manichaeism than from Jesus. The Council Fathers rejected the old distinction between a supernatural world and a natural world. Rather, the whole world was graced, because it was redeemed by Christ. And, because the redemption was supposed to go on, in time, through the mediation of "other Christs," i.e., His followers, then Christians should get to work stop fleeing the world, and/or fretting because it was evil. Rather, they should roll up their sleeves and make it good, i.e., complete the work of redemption.

This, the Council said in effect, would be a new way, a new truth, and a new life for the people of God, who would be guided as much by the unpredictable winds of the Holy Spirit as by the strict orders of a hierarchical Church. In a way, the Council was getting us ready for a new kind of world, one in which the official Church would cease to be an answer machine, but a place where people could come together and inspire one another in a new global community.

Gaudium et Spes was echoing Pope John XXIII, when he said that if the Church was going to be at the service of the world, it had to go through an aggiornamento. Only then could the Church speak the life-giving, freedom-message of Jesus to people in language they could understand. Only then could it put its blessing on a world that was basically good, because God had made it and because it was redeemed by his Incarnate presence.

To understand how radical that move was, we should look back over the last hundred years, when three successive popes saw the world as basically bad. No wonder, then, that 20th century Europe took shape without the help of the Church's better thinkers. Two horrible world wars later, some of those thinkers (many of whom had themselves been ordered to stay out of the intellectual mainstream) realized that the Church, now verging on one billion strong, could not stand apart from the world any longer, to condemn it; they must get involved in it, in order to redeem it.
In Latin America, some theologians developed a new theology in the spirit of Gaudium et Spes, and they succeeded in demonstrating to the wider Church that it must support what was called "a preferential option for the poor." Their liberation theology, unfortunately, drew down the wrath of the well-heeled aristocracy in Latin America, which had the ear of the Vatican. Soon, the liberation theologians had to answer wild-eyed charges of heresy by a spate of right wing prelates. Many of the liberation theologians left the Church, and their clerical accusers won high level jobs in the Vatican as a reward. But this was some time after Hans Küng was oozing optimism about Vatican II. In 1968, Küng wrote:

In spite of all, what is now important is not to complain of the indisputable obscurities, compromises, omissions, imbalance, retrograde steps and mistakes as defects of the past, in a critical maneuver directed backward, but to see them in forward-looking hope as tasks of the future, in the spirit of the Council, which did not want to close any doors. For in a sense the Council, the true realization of the Council event, began on December 8, 1965. [I.e., the day Vatican II ended.] And precisely in order to prepare the better future, we must at the present time not make the better the enemy of the good, but the good the herald of the better. The Council offered a splendid program for a renewed Church of the future. (This from Hans Küng, Truthfulness: the future of the Church. (London: Doubleday, 1968), p. B6.)

A Half-Stab at Collegiality

Paul VI was too good a pope, and too good a thinker, to let collegiality die the death it did during the back stairs intrigues that were needed to get the unanimity he craved in November 1964. He, too, could read the signs of the times, and he knew there was something the 20th century did not love about monarchy. And so, he tried to make amends for the Council's Third Session by announcing the next fall, during the Fourth Session, that he would seek the advice and consent of the world's bishops in a planned series of synods that would meet every two or three years. In his motu proprio of September 15, 1965, he called particular attention to the fact asserted (but attenuated) in Lumen Gentium that "the Holy Spirit has placed bishops to rule the Church of God."

Pope Paul VI held five synods–generally for two, three or four week periods in the Rome autumns of 1967, 1969, 1971, 1974 and 1977. By many accounts (they were conducted in secret), the pope was unhappy with the synods. They didn't help enkindle any of the fire experienced by the bishops at Vatican II. They were too short, they were over managed by the Roman Curia, and the theologians who had been so much present at the Council were told to stay home. Cardinal Karol Wojtyla was named the relator, or reporter, at the Synod of 1974, which was called to discuss the problems of preaching the Gospel in the new world Church that had suddenly become so visible at the Council. But when it came time for Wojtyla to deliver his summary of the Synod's conclusions, he found it impossible to get the Synod's agreement on the text he proposed writing. In retrospect, it was a bad omen of trouble to come, an indication that the Polish cardinal was not a great team player.

His text was handed over to a post-synodal commission, which didn't do any better with it. They gave it to the pope, who gave it to the Jesuit editor of Civilta Cattolica, Roberto Tucci. Tucci, now Cardinal Tucci, tinkered with it and pulled an apostolic exhortation out of it, Evangelii Nuntiandi. It is one of the finest documents of Paul VI's pontificate, a proof that the diverse input of sixty or seventy fellow bishops (and a marvelous editor) could lead to a richer, more textured treatment than the average papal speech generated by the Curia.

Paul VI came closer to setting the Church on a more radical course when he ordered a commission working on a new Code of Canon Law to set up something he called a Lex Ecclesiae Fundamentalis, a kind of underpinning for the Code that resembled nothing so much as a Bill of Rights for the Church. The work proceeded under a seal of secrecy–probably because that was the norm for everything at the higher echelons of Church governance. No one challenged the anomaly, of a Church commission working in secret on a Bill of Rights, which might have contained a fundamental right of all Catholics to know what is going on in their own Church. The Commission, which was led by Cardinal Pericle Felice, an archconservative from the Roman Curia, and Msgr. William Onclin, a canon lawyer from Louvain University, had a draft prepared by the middle of 1966 and a revised version the following year 1967. That year, the Commission submitted to the International Synod of Bishops a set of ten principles to guide the revision of the Code, and that document was overwhelmingly approved. The Commission circulated another draft in 1969, and then, in 1971, an amended text was sent to all the bishops in the world, still sub secreto.

Leonard Swidler reported that that draft was leaked to the press and published on March 15, 1971, by Il Regno, a Catholic magazine edited in Bologna, Italy. (For their efforts, its editors were fired.). Swidler noted two things about the Lex Ecclesiae Fundamentalis: 1) Clearly, it was to serve as a "constitution" in

the sense that it was to provide the fundamental juridical framework within which all other Church law was to be understood and applied. It would have power comparable to that of the American Constitution; if any subsequent legislation was found contrary to the Lex Fundamentalis, the subsequent law would be void. 2) The Lex Fundamentalis was to serve as a fundamental list of rights of the members of the Church, like the American "Bill of Rights."

(See Leonard Swidler, Toward a Catholic Constitution. (New York: Crossroad, 1996), p. 126.) Why didn't the Church go ahead with this Bill of Rights? Or, in fact, with an entire Constitution modeled after the U.S. Constitution? Swidler reported that "the whole Lex project was put to death, without explanation, in 1981 after it had been approved by a specially convened international commission earlier in the year." (Some of Msgr. Onclin's rights ended up being enfolded in the 1983 Code of Canon Law, but few Catholics-in-the-pews know they have any of the rights delineated there.) The missing explanation: we had a new pope by then, John Paul II, who had no wish to see any attenuation of his authority. He must have thanked God that his predecessor, Paul VI, hadn't forced the Lex Fundamentalis more forcefully.

Paul VI had not received the support he needed on this project–from either his own Curia or from the eminent theologians who had had such an important role to play in Vatican II. He was in a typical quandary, ever the Hamlet, often trying to please everyone, and ending up on everyone's hate list as a result. In this case, Il Regno's report didn't help any. First, there was a furor over the project because it was being conducted in secret, this by a pope who had just signed a papal instruction, Communio et Progressio, which said that the Church should tell the world what it was doing, reporting "its intentions as well as its works." That instruction said, "When ecclesiastical authorities are unwilling to give information or are unable to do so, then rumor is unloosed and rumor is not a bearer of truth but carries dangerous half truths. Secrecy should therefore be restricted to matters involving the good name of individuals or that touch on the rights of people whether singly or collectively." (Peter Hebblethwaite, Paul VI, p. 575.)

Onclin called a news conference and was challenged by an unfriendly Vatican Press Corps, always angry when long-time Vatican secrets are sprung on them. In this case, the press people were rather stupid not to recognize that a constitution was precisely the instrument needed by the people of God to stop the abuses of power that were so endemic in the monarchic Church. The press covering the Vatican knew about these abuses–more, perhaps, than any one. A constitution that held everyone accountable to the people of God would have made their lives as reporters more interesting and more productive as well. But the press fired hostile questions at Onclin.

One reporter said that the Church had gotten along without a constitution for 2000 years. Why did it need one now? Onclin said, "It is a part of the evolutionary processes of society." He pointed out that France did not have a constitution until after the Revolution, and that Italy did not have one until after World War II. Someone else wondered why the Church needed secular models. Wasn't the Church that was defined at Vatican II better understood in Biblical images–the people of God, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ–not in terms of civil society?

Too bad there were no U.S. theologians around to enter the debate. American Catholics had long ago come to terms with democracy and religious freedom (even in spite of a condemnation of Americanism by Pope Leo XIII in 1899), and they found the U.S. Constitution's neutrality on religion more of a help than a hindrance to the vitality of their Catholicism. Americans understood what a constitution could do. But Continental Catholics didn't seem to get it. German theologians were the worst. In his Infallible: an Inquiry, Hans Küng found the Lex an ominous thing that was "crammed with formularies of Vatican II, but conceived in a completely absolutist sense, which, if it were ever to be accepted, could bury once and for all the progress made at Vatican II." Karl Rahner said the nature of the Church and a constitution were incompatible, "since the Church is always developing in response to the promptings of the Holy Spirit who could never be part of its constitution." (Rahner, a Jesuit, didn't seem to flash on the fact that St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus not only wrote a constitution for the Order, but gave a thorough-going raison d'être for having a constitution that has never been topped for its intelligence and its brevity.) A fellow German theologian, Walter Kasper, sided with Rahner, arguing in a long, learned

article that the Lex was an instrument in a policy of restoration that would undo all the achievements of the Council. According to the Vaticanista Peter Hebblethwaite, “That was the end of it.”

But it wasn’t the end. Leonard Swidler has made a constitution for the Church into a cause. He has drafted a model constitution for the universal Church and analogous constitutions for a diocese and a parish, with a delineation of rights and responsibilities, separation of powers, election of priests, bishops and popes, and terms of office (for a bishop or a pope: ten years). He had teams of translators turning his Catholic Constitution into seven languages. And when the cardinals were pouring into Rome to elect John Paul’s successor, he fully expected to have a team of men and women in Rome to lobby them. Their purpose: to see whether and how they could nudge the next papacy into making plans for a constitutional government. Swidler didn’t get his wish. (See my account of the 2005 conclave in A Church in Search of Itself (Knopf 2006).

Swidler even had Hans Küng rethinking his original objections, for he had shown Küng that constitutional law could beat the Roman Curia at their own game and “make an absolutist monarch into at least a constitutional monarch.” Swidler also had Andrew Greeley on board. In a preface to Swidler’s Toward a Catholic Constitution, Greeley said the Church needed a constitution to help Catholics vindicate their rights against oppressive pastors and bishops. Greeley wrote:

Priests and religious educators all over America have added extra-canonical regulations for the reception of the sacraments and often deny sacraments to those who don’t live up the regulations. It would appear that neither bishops nor pastors nor the laity know that the laity have rights and that these rights are violated constantly.

Greeley added, “Obviously there will be a strong opposition to the notion of a Constitution for the Church. It would severely limit the absolute power that many church persons think they have.” And he disposed of Rahner’s Holy Spirit argument by pointing out that membership in the Church does not erase our human nature. “It would be like saying that the Lord Jesus, because of His special relationship with God, did not need sleep.”

Learning to Grow Up

Pope Paul VI had the best intentions on so many issues, but he was caught up in the papalist culture so completely that he could not conceive of a papacy in which the pope did not have to decide everything all by himself. He had the uncanny capacity for jumping halfway across every ditch, and ending up, of course, with his backside in the mud. The best example: he expanded John XXIII’s birth control commission, and then, after the commission told him the Church had to stop condemning couples for practicing birth control, agonized for more than two years as if the whole burden of sending all those souls to hell were his alone.

I have to explain that. Here, briefly, is the story. The Council had a chance to deal very specifically with a question that was causing modern Catholics huge problems-the problem of regulating birth, possibly with a new invention called The Pill. Wisely, the Council deferred discussion on this, not least because one of its canniest members said his fellow bishops were in no position to give couples any advice here; the bishops suffered, he said, “from a celibate psychosis.” Translation: their clerical mindset told them that since sex was a no-no for clerics, married people shouldn’t enjoy it too much; love-making should be secondary, in keeping with a classic formulation: the primary end of marriage was the procreation and education of children, and the secondary end, the mutual love of husband and wife. But the Fathers of the Council went ahead to reject the old primary-secondary formula entirely, set aside their celibate psychoses for the moment, and put a new blessing on conjugal lovemaking. In a key paragraph of Gaudium et Spes, they said:

Such love, merging the human and the divine, leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of themselves… Such love pervades the whole of their lives. Indeed, by its generous activity, it grows better and grows

greater. Therefore, it far exceeds mere erotic inclination. This love is uniquely expressed and perfected through the marital act.

They also warned couples not to break off full intimacy when "they find themselves in circumstances where at least temporarily the size of their families should not be increased."

Old line Catholics who wanted permission to use The Pill (or any kind of contraception) were told that if contraception was wrong, the Church couldn't give them permission, and that if it wasn't wrong, they didn't need permission. Those made uncomfortable by all this new responsibility insisted:

"Couldn't the Church just tell them? Was contraception wrong or wasn't it?" Leaks from that birth control commission gave them an unsettling answer: "That's up to you to figure out. The morality of contraception depends more on your motives than your methods, and maybe more on aesthetics than ethics."

Something new was happening in the Church; Catholics were learning that morality was no longer a question of obedience to a set of literal laws (presumably from on high). They had to distinguish right from wrong on some intrinsic criteria, by asking themselves whether whatever it was they were doing was hurting themselves, or hurting others. And then they had to let their own conscience be their guide. Conscience was a new word in the popular Catholic lexicon. The people of God had to learn to grow up. Then—and perhaps only then—could make their Church a people's Church.

How Do We Make It a People's Church?

As we know, the Church did not become a people's Church. At the end of the millennium, almost 40 years after Vatican II, the pope was still a monarch. Bishops were still lords. Lay people were still being told to pray, pay–and shut up. We were still advised that there are seven sacraments for men, but only six for women. What happened? I think the Council got de-railed on its way to the 21st century. The Council's leaders weren't thinking politically enough. (I might say, "humanly enough." For politics, like history, is human, and if we try to ignore politics in the Church, we're simply deceiving ourselves.) The Council Fathers had a vision–of a Church that was more decentralized and more democratic. But they didn't set up the machinery that would make that vision happen. A new council could set up that machinery. It is quite possible that only a council could.

Some have been calling for a new council. But, according to canon law, only a pope can call a council. We do not expect Benedict XVI, as much of a Restorationist as his predecessor, to call a Vatican III. Whether we see a new council or not, depends to a large extent on the pope who follows Benedict. If he is listening to history, as Pope John XXIII did, we will have that council. I cannot imagine a pope who is truly a man of the 21st century who does not listen to history. Sooner or later, in fact, I predict we will have three councils, one for the Catholic Church, so we can get our own house in order, one for all Christians, and one, after all that, for all religions. If these councils are true to their implicit mandate, to serve the people, all of them will have the same task: to listen to history.

We listen to history, of course, by watching CNN and reading Thomas Friedman. Journalism is history in a hurry, and this accelerated history is telling us right now that there are forces all over the Catholic world–mainly led by lay men and lay women, but also by many lively priests and nuns–that are fed up with the Church as they have known it. They are tired of being treated like imbeciles. And they want something new.

Some who are not students of history wonder if they will have to secede–go into schism–in order to do that. We don't. We are members of a Church that has always found a way to reform. Vatican II showed us a way. We are the Church. We speak out. We say what we want. I see American Catholics doing this soon, once they realize that they can push for the creation of quasi-independent Churches within the Catholic family, local Churches that are home-grown, home-spun, home-made institutions that reflect the best that is their American culture.

Let me explain. In the years since Vatican II, theologians–most particularly the theologians who are called "missiologists"– have written a great deal about the need for inculturation of the Gospel: Christ came for all humankind, but for centuries, particularly in Africa and Asia, the Christ of the missionaries was a foreigner. The Spanish and Portuguese and Belgian traders brought with them colonial soldiers, a colonial government, and a colonial Church. Vatican II's charter, as contained in Lumen Gentium, Gaudium et Spes and Ad Gentes, the document on the missions, repudiated this colonial Church. If Christ came for all men, then Christ's message and Christ's meaning had to be for all cultures. He didn't need a passport. Christ had to be African. He had to be Asian.

Making the Church incarnate in every culture–they started using the term inculturation to describe the process–was going to be a huge project. It would not be a simple "adaptation"–not as easy as putting on a different costume in different time zones or in different climes. And it wasn't something that could be imposed from the top down, by a new set of directives from the Holy See. The new post-conciliar Church had to be local–home-grown, home-spun, home-made.

Some of the best thinking on inculturation came out of Asia, whose theologians began to work on a particularly Asian vision of church, a network of truly collaborative local churches working through dialogue for total human liberation.

The Indian Jesuit Samuel Rayan said he and his confreres in India had to "decolonialize theology" itself. Theologies were imported from Western academies, "made in royal palaces, castles and abbeys by the ruling class and for the ruling class." Naturally the perspectives, interests, ideas and designs of the ruling class and the rich became crystallized in those theologies, and they tended to legitimize the socio-economic, cultural and political order of the time…. Some are born masters and others slaves. The missionaries who came with the masters preached submission, resignation and other-worldly salvation, rather than community, friendship, obedience to truth, the pursuit of justice and the Reign of God on earth. They focused on the salvation of each soul; they neglected the neighbor's physical needs, and overlooked the problem of the health of society and the wholeness of history. Rayan said:

…Colonial theology cannot speak for us, cannot speak from within our encounter with God, from within our cries and tears, nor from within the sufferings colonialism has inflicted on us. It can only reflect the colonizers' interests, and use the Gospel to justify oppression, and to call for submission and resignation. It cannot nurse us into freedom fighters, cannot suckle a spirituality for combat. It easily becomes a tool in the hands of ruling classes and colonialists to keep their victims in bondage.

Rayan set out an agenda for the Church in Asia, one that was mulled over and finally adopted by the most forward thinking body in the Church today, the Federation of Asian Bishops Councils. They would have to reject theological imports and imitations, re-appropriate their own theological soil and its promises and possibilities, sow this soil with their own problems, sufferings and struggles, their own needs, hopes, experiences, and tears; and harvest new humanizing visions that could then create a new reign of justice and peace, now, in this life, and on this planet.

As if that task wasn't challenging enough, the Asian bishops came to the gradual realization over the past 30 years that inculturation in Asia demanded something more than decolonializing their own theology. The Church in Asia, they said, also had to engage in a dialogue with the Asian people–do some hard listening, especially to the poor, that aimed at a deep, loving and respectful understanding of their cultures and their religions. This dialogue wouldn't be a substitute for proclamation and evangelization, or a simple strategy for reasons of survival on a continent where Catholics were less than two percent of the population. They pursued this dialogue because they wanted to understand how the Holy Spirit was working even in Buddhists and Hindus.

How Far Can Inculturation Go?

In an effort to understand how this inculturation was working in Asia, I spent a week in the spring of 2001 with the Jesuit theologian Aloysius Pieris at his study center not far from the capital of Sri Lanka. Pieris

was a diminutive fellow (five foot two) with a café latte complexion who was born 74 years ago in a land once known as Ceylon. It became a British tea-colony in 1818, after successive dominations by the Portuguese in the 16th century, and then the Dutch. Under Portuguese colonials, Pieris' forebears became Catholic converts. Pieris is thankful they did; otherwise, he would never have received the education he did, in the Jesuit Order, which he joined at age nineteen at an international house of studies in India. He did his theology in Naples, close to the action at Vatican II during the early 1960s, when he and his classmates often entertained some of the Council's leading theologians. Pieris remembers his last encounter with Karl Rahner and Rahner's exact words: "Vatican II is not an end, but a beginning. You have to spell out its implications for your people in the context of their life situations."

For the past 40 years, Pieris has been trying to do exactly that. After finishing his Jesuit training, he returned to Sri Lanka for doctoral studies in Buddhist philosophy at the University of Sri Lanka's Vidyodaya campus, the first priest (in fact the first Christian) ever to win a doctorate there in Buddhist philosophy, despite the fact that he had had no aspirations to live the life of a scholar. "I was a poet and a musician," he told me. "I wanted to write plays. I wanted to dance. And I wanted to work with the rural youth." At the time, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, revolution was in the air, and Pieris studied with the rambunctious youth in Sri Lanka's cradle of revolution, the university campus, to watch them grow from the unthinking tools of others into adult actors in their own futures. Then the Jesuit General, Fr. Pedro Arrupe, snatched him up to teach Buddhism at the Jesuits' Gregorian University in Rome and, during the Rome summers, at another Jesuit training ground in Manila, the East Asian Pastoral Institute. He also taught at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley.

When Pieris returned to Sri Lanka from his teaching assignments, he felt called to cross-fertilize the socialist concerns of these rural students (and others in Sri Lanka) with their own authentic Buddhist roots. In 1974, after two years of discernment and prayer and consultation with his superiors, he founded his Tulana Center, "as a kind of laboratory where they could feel at home and deepen themselves in their own orientation." The word tulana comes from the Sanskrit root tul, which has a variety of meanings: elevate, weigh, compare, lean toward more important things. But, in its infancy, the Tulana Center seemed anything but important.

Pieris started his center with a hundred rupees. A few months later, Pieris got a letter from a French Benedictine monk Jean Leclerq, who applauded what he was doing. It contained a check for the equivalent of two hundred and forty U.S. dollars, a fortune in Sri Lanka, where a dollar could then buy enough groceries for a week.

Since those humble beginnings, Pieris has pursued his pioneering work as a kind of free-lance Jesuit (i.e., without tenure in a Jesuit university) with one major agenda: to understand Buddhists, not to convert them, and to work with them in what he calls "our common struggle for liberation." While Pieris can understand some Jesuits in other places in the world who also assume the mantle of Buddhist monks, particularly as Zen Buddhists, that route is not for him. "Our people wouldn't understand this double-identity," he says, "and therefore I don't claim it."

Instead, Pieris has continued to deepen his own knowledge about the sources of Buddhism. Working with its prime original texts in Pali and other Asian languages, Pieris has gone on to publish a number of learned commentaries on Buddhism, and his Buddhist library at the Tulana Center is now a place where Buddhist scholars come, to read, reflect, and confer with him. But Pieris would not call himself a Buddhist. "I am critically loyal to the Church," he says. "I have a deep faith in Jesus Christ."

Because he is so certain and so secure in that identity, Pieris is rather impervious to inquiries by the Vatican's ministry of truth. "We have a great advantage here in Asia," he says, "because we work in languages that Cardinal Ratzinger does not understand." (He told me this before Cardinal Ratzinger became pope.)

That didn't seem to stop Ratzinger's heresy hunters from dogging other Asian theologians for the past decade with a quiet fury. I suspect that if Pieris keeps writing his popular works in English (which he has

been doing at a rate of roughly one every year), it won't be long before his provincial gets another letter from the Holy Office. So far, the Holy Office has not remarked on Pieris' most recent book, a slim paperback based on private talks that Pieris gave to predominantly Jesuit audiences in 1997 and 1998. Someday, probably after Pieris has passed on, the CDF will no doubt condemn his Christhood of Jesus and the Discipleship of Mary: An Asian Perspective, as it posthumously condemned Anthony DeMello's marvelous little books of meditation. In his book, Pieris takes up some of the very issues that led to the excommunication in 1998 of Pieris' fellow Sri Lankan theologian, the Oblate Tissa Balasuriya, an edict that was later revoked by Pope John Paul II after a worldwide outcry in defense of Balasuriya.

In his book, Pieris goes right to the heart of the Roman, papalist agenda with a gentle attack on the very notion of dogmatic definitions themselves, pieces of legalism that owe more to Roman law than to the loving words of Jesus and his followers in the early years of Christianity. "Faith," he wrote, "began to be judged, and the deviants condemned, entirely on the basis of one's adherence to the formula of faith" as defined by Church authorities. The result was a set of faith propositions that parallel a legal code, which seem to call for an efficient monitoring system that maintains doctrinal purity, a system which, it turns out, is run by "a powerful clerical class armed with massive punitive powers."

The Church, says Pieris, should have known better, from its own history. "The history of the Christological dogmas… is not an edifying story of an innocuous development of a teaching; it is a sad story of serious misunderstandings, punctuated by political intrigues and physical violence." He cites the Council of Chalcedon, which condemned the Patriarch of Alexandria in 451. Fifteen centuries later, in 1951, Pope Pius XII revoked the condemnation with an encyclical that admitted confusion over some vocabulary. Formulas, says Pieris, often do more harm than good, especially if those formulas are asserted as "coming from Divine Revelation."

In fact, says Pieris, all the Church's formulas are culturally conditioned. As human constructs, then, they are relative, time-bound, and culturally limited expressions of faith that cannot be used as absolute norms for measuring orthodoxy. But it is precisely on this ground, relativism, that Ratzinger and company condemned Asian theologians, who tended to agree with Pieris that dogmas are not divinely revealed at all, but guiding statements that serve the believing community as practical aids "to foster and fructify our faith and hope in God who is love."

During his almost 24 years in the papacy, Pope John Paul II had enough good sense to sympathize with inculturation, as an idea: You don't trample on a native culture. You plant the seed of the Gospel in that culture, and, God willing, it grows there. The pope could endorse this theory as embodied in the Congo, for example. There, most notably, the native Congolese clergy fashioned a native Congolese liturgy. Drums and dancing did not seem to upset Cardinal Medina Estevez, and they did not upset his successor at the Congregation for Sacred Worship, the Nigerian Cardinal Francis Arinze.

Outside Africa, however, the pope and the Roman Curia have found it very difficult to approve local attempts at inculturation. There's a Roman way of doing things, and, Council or no Council, Rome wants control. We cannot forget how the pope and his Curia came down hard on the inculturation in Latin America that went by the name of liberation theology. Liberation theology was less a theory than a movement, pushed largely by priests and nuns urging the little people of Latin America to organize for their share of this world's goods. They fanned out over the continent, telling the people they would find salvation in the next life, but that Jesus had also come to bring them salvation now, in the form of a new awareness that the world was good—in fact, redeemed.

Trouble was that the pope had already been convinced by his own nuncios in Latin America, who had themselves been influenced by agents of the U.S. C.I.A., that liberation theology was part of a Communist plot. He commissioned one negative letter on liberation theology in 1984. He had another drafted in 1986 that seemed to cancel the first. Poor man, he was being chivvied on all sides, with the Latin American bishops pushing from the left, and members of Opus Dei pulling from the right. The mysterious visits to the pope of Robert MacFarlane, Pres. Ronald Reagan's chief security advisor and right wing ideologue, have yet to be documented, but they no doubt had an influence on the pope,

occasioned as they were by envelopes full of large denomination U.S. bills delivered to the pope's friends in Poland.

Liberation theology still lives. Concern for social justice has become part of the job description for Catholic leaders everywhere. Many dioceses throughout the world have active commissions for peace and justice, run mostly by laymen and laywomen. And students of the 20th century's ongoing revolutions have noted that advocates of other liberations have adopted the rhetoric-and some of the argument—of the liberation theologians of Latin America. They have come up with a more effective formula for those who wanted to be Christ-bearers in the modern world. They got their orders straight out of Matthew 25, where Jesus told the disciples they would be not be admitted to paradise for knowing the right passwords (i.e., abstract truths) but on the strength of their giving food, drink, clothing and shelter to the poor.

How would inculturation work in other parts of the world? It would mean that the people of Japan, for example, could adapt the language of the liturgy to their own way of thinking and feeling. In the mid-1990s, the Japanese bishops commissioned a Japanese translation of the Roman Missal, only to find Rome rejecting it on the say-so of a first year seminarian from Japan who found some inclusive language in those translations. English-speaking bishops have found a similar obtuseness when they send Rome the translations worked out by the International Commission for English in the Liturgy. The history of ICEL, and its recent scuttling by the Vatican, demonstrates that the pope and the Roman Curia still do not understand that if the Church isn't local it's not a people's Church at all, but a carbon copy of the Roman Church.

What kind of machinery will make Christ and the Church more African, more Asian, more American? To answer this question, we have to think, as they say, "outside the box." That is, creatively, unconventionally. Like the man driving along in his little Mercedes who spots three people waiting for a bus. One is a woman who looks like she is having a seizure. One is the man's best friend. The third is the woman of this man's dreams. He stops, wondering what to do. Thinking conventionally, with a car that only has room for one passenger, he has to make a decision: "Which one does he give a ride to?" Thinking out of the box, he comes up with this solution: He gets out of his car, gives the car keys to his best friend so he can take the woman in trouble to the hospital, then sits down and waits for the bus with the woman of his dreams.

Okay. Out of the box now. Consider this: The Roman Catholic Church may be the biggest body in Christendom, but it is not the only Catholic Church. There are twenty other Catholic Churches in the Catholic world who believe as we do, in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, his only son our Lord, and so on. They're called Melkites, Maronites, Copts, Byzantines, Syro Malabars, Chaldeans, etc etc. They have their own patriarch, and their own elected bishops. They have their own ancient and vernacular liturgies and their own married AND celibate priesthood. These are the ancient autochthonous churches of the Middle East. Autochthonous doesn't mean independent. The peoples of these autochthonous churches are loyal to the pope. They just don't look very Roman. Autochthonous means home-grown, home-spun, home-made. It means local. It means vital.

I submit that a new council could really move the Church into the 21st century by creating autochthonous Churches everywhere - Churches that would grow their own unique, local solutions to pastoral problems that might never win approval in Rome. Democracy is still a dirty word in some Vatican circles. In the United States, we take democracy for granted. The priests of the thirteen colonies elected John Carroll the first U.S. bishop in 1788, and, except for the fact that Rome was just then setting out on a new centralizing path, Americans might be electing their own bishops in the U.S. today.

You may say that autochthony is all well and good, in theory. But whoever said we could create new autochthonous Churches?

I have two stories to tell you, one from Belgium, one from Indonesia. They suggest that autochthony is not an unthinkable notion.

Autochthony was something thinkable to Cardinal D.J. Mercier of Belgium. In 1925, Cardinal Mercier proposed in the last of the trailblazing, ecumenical Malines Conversations between Anglicans and Roman Catholics that the Anglican Communion be brought back into union with Rome as an autochthonous Church–with its own married clergy and its own English liturgy. He was egged on by the Belgian Benedictine Dom Lambert Beauduin. In fact, Beauduin wrote his speech for him, entitled "United Not Absorbed." As it turned out, the pope at the time, Pius XI, thought that making the Anglican Communion an autochthonous Church was a terrible idea. Moreover, he closed down the Malines Conversations, and wrote an encyclical, Mortalium Animos, forbidding any more ecumenical dialogues. Vatican II changed that kind of thinking. Pope John XXIII launched the Church on a whole new track. It was no surprise to me when I learned that it was none other than Lambert Beauduin who first suggested to the nuncio in Paris in 1945, Angelo Roncalli, that the Church needed a Council. And it was Pope John's Council that got us to the brink of autochthony.

Autochthony was not unthinkable to the Indonesian bishops in 1998, who came to the Asian Synod in Rome in a rather angry mood. In their Response to the Lineamenta, the discussion guidelines sent to them by Cardinal Jan Schotte, the Indonesian bishops complained, saying that Rome had neither the knowledge nor the competence to make pastoral decisions in Indonesia. They weren't merely talking about language issues, but also about radically different ways of thinking. They called for a de-centralized Church, and a return to the polity of the Church as it was in the first three centuries, with a bishop of Rome who never thought of himself as a pope.

It may have been a good strategy, to look to the example of the primitive Church. An Indonesian theologian told me, "The Church we know best moves forward by moving back." But no one in Indonesia made any moves in 1999 or 2000 toward an autochthonous Church. This is not something that a group of bishops just decides to do. It is a move that needs to be prepped by public discussion, and promoted by public opinion. This is one reason why I am laying it out here, and one reason why I wrote a utopian novel about an autochthonous Church in the U.S. I am planting a seed. Someday, the seed may flower–somewhere.

In the winter of 2010, in an Ireland that was reeling in the wake of official government reports about Irish bishops covering up for their wayward priests, some laymen and lay women of influence were calling for an autochthonous Church in Ireland. It was not exactly clear to them how that might happen. Could the priests and people of Ireland simply write a Declaration of Autochthony, without getting permission of the pope to do so?

Autochthony=Democracy=Accountability

By the year 2001, it was clear to the Indonesian bishops that their call for autochthony would never be answered outside a council, and so, in their Responses to the Lineamenta for the Worldwide Synod of Bishops in 2001, they proposed a new Universal Council to launch the radical decentralization implied in the concept of autochthony. "Only then," they said, "can we be free to proclaim the gospel."

Francis Hadisumarta, the tall, handsome, Carmelite bishop of Manokwari-Sorong, from an ancient Javanese family, stood up in that synod of 2001, and spoke eloquently about the need for an autochthonous Church in Indonesia. "Theology, spirituality, law and liturgy," he said, "should be as diverse as our languages and cultures." He said, rather forthrightly for an Indonesian, that Rome had been over controlling the Church in Indonesia, maintaining an authority that inhibited evangelization, "Why is the New Evangelization not taking off as expected? What do we lack? What we need is trust: trust in God and trust in each other. Trust needs … the necessary authority to make decisions."

Liturgical translations and adaptations, he said, have to go to Rome for approval – "by people who do not understand our language." For 30 years, the bishops of Indonesia had been asking Rome for permission to ordain viri probati, proven men, asking in vain. As a result, most dioceses in Indonesia "live by the Word rather than by Word and Sacrament. We are becoming Protestant by default. A local Church becomes truly local when its laws are not only in line with the spirit of the Gospel and ecclesial norms but also with

the ethos and legal tradition of the local people. In many crucial pastoral areas, we need the authority to interpret Church Law according to our own cultural ethos, to change, and where necessary, to replace it."

And then Hadisumarta pointed to the ancient autochthonous Churches of Asia, and asked if the Church could imagine the birth of new patriarchates, conciliar in nature, and a host of local rites in Asia, "united collegially in faith and trust, listening to each other through appropriate synodal instruments at every level in the faith community. to support, strengthen and broaden the work of individual episcopal conferences?"

I suspect there are many in the U.S. who might want to cast a vote for autochthony. We see the need more clearly now, with all the stories about clerical sexual abuse filling the front pages, than ever before, with various solutions proposed by the American bishops, only to find Rome exercising a veto over some of them. We are not in charge of our own Church. In recent travels across the U.S. I have heard more and more people saying, "We no longer need Rome telling us how to recruit and train our own ministers of the Gospel. We need to have a national conversation about the specifics. But it is we, the people of God in the U.S., who should be making something new, to replace a clerical system (celibate males only) that was mandated by Pope Gregory VII in the eleventh century, and unthinkingly adopted by Americans in the early days of our nation, and is now so obviously dying."

We can probably understand why Indonesians might want an inculturated Gospel in the Indonesian Church. But few, if any, have thought about the need for inculturation in the American Church, which has a set of problems that are entirely different from those of Africa or Asia. Where Africans have their drums and their dancing, where Asians have their ancient religions, Americans have their own civic gods, Democracy and its sister Freedom, calling for an understanding and a sympathy that Rome cannot conceive.

My Utopian Novel Helps Imagine

In my utopian novel, Cardinal Mahony, you can read this exchange:

Rackham broke through the merriment, all frowns. "Roger, aren't you assuming you need Rome's approval on everything? A people's Church in America that made its own rules could change that celibacy thing in a New York minute."

"Which is why," said Mahony with some finality, "Rome would never give us permission to have a people's Church."

"Why do we need permission to have a people's Church?" asked Rackham.

"Huh?" They were all startled at the suggestion.

"I mean," said Rackham, "if you just declared autochthony, you'd be autochthonous, wouldn't you?" They sat in silence. Rackham's proposal seemed too simple. Then, finally, Pike got it. He said, "You mean, like, the Founding Fathers signed the Declaration of Independence on the Fourth of July 1776? They didn't need to ask King George III's permission. They just told Thomas Jefferson to write a draft, made a few fixes in it, and signed it."

"Yes,"said Juana Margarita Obregón."'Autochthonous' and 'permission' are two things that do not quite go together do they?"

Rackham said, "I think this is why the move by the Indonesian bishops failed. They thought they needed the pope's permission. When they didn't get it, they rolled over and played dead. They should have made a declaration of autochthony and gone ahead with the ordination of married men. And done other things to help them inculturate the gospel in Indonesia." Rackham smiled at his own words. He was the Chameleon

Man in Woody Allen's movie, "Zelig." Hang out with Catholic theologians, you begin to talk like a Catholic theologian.

A Big Crying Need

In 2000, when John Paul II was returning from a pilgrimage to Fatima, Portugal, where he beatified two of the three children who had had a vision there of the Blessed Virgin in 1917, one of the members of the press on the papal plane observed to Archbishop John Foley, "The Holy Father seemed a little slow on his feet today." Foley took the implied question to the pope, sitting up in the first class cabin. The pope told Foley, "I don't run the Church with my feet, you know."

The second biggest problem in the Church of John Paul II was this-that he was trying, too hard, perhaps-to "run the Church." The biggest problem was that the rest of the Church (beginning with many of the world's bishops) let him do so.

The Roman synods were a case in point. Many of those bishops who have attended one or more of John Paul's 17 synods went through the motions of a truly democratic consultation. They came to Rome, they met for a month, they drew up a list of recommendations designed to make the Church a more effective presence. But when they saw how their recommendations were ignored, or edited to conform to the pope's personal predilections, they understood this was all a show. Few bishops complained publicly. As a consequence, John Paul's papacy looked in some ways like the regime of Pius IX. If any think this is an unfair indictment, they should remember that John Paul II beatified Pius IX on September 3, 2000. There had never been a popular devotion to Pius IX. That didn't seem to matter. The pope did what he wanted to, when he wanted to, for his own (often unstated) reasons, and, as the cardinal in charge of his synods told the Vatican Press Corps on June 1, 2001, "The pope is accountable only to God."

John Paul II's successor, Benedict XVI, has given no indication that he thinks differently about the running of his own synods. The bishops who attend them are accountable to him, and he is accountable to God. It is this unaccountability, I submit, that ails the Church most today, and this, I submit, is the real unfinished business of Vatican II. What bothers us most about "the priest-sex crisis" is not that we have had a few (very few) priest-pedophiles, or perhaps a greater number of ephebophiles (still very few out of a total of 40,000 good and faithful priests), but that two thirds of our bishops have covered up for them (this in obedience to a secret 2001 order by Cardinal Ratzinger), and even assigned them to places where they could carry on in shameful ways with other innocent youngsters.

Now, after we have agonized through months and years of scandal, we are beginning to understand the problem: Rome has given us bishops who operate on two standards, one standard for the baptized, another for the ordained, one standard for priests, another for bishops, one standard for men, another standard for women, one standard for justice and dialogue outside the Church, another for justice and dialogue within. Many U.S. bishops wheel and deal in secret, put their careers first and the people second, and defer constantly to Rome on issues that we know violate the bishops' own pastoral common sense.

What is the answer? We would like accountability from our bishops, but we cannot seem to get it. Cardinal Law was assigned to Boston to serve the people, but his service wasn't predicated on his ability to serve. Rather, he remained on the job for months (spurning a general clamor that he quit) because he had the sympathy of the pope, whose own sovereignty would be much attenuated if Cardinal Law had to listen to the people of Boston (or, worse, to the editors of The Boston Globe).
What can the American Church do? So far, the U.S. bishops have attempted to swallow some aspirin to cure the cancer in the institution. But they didn't come up with any mechanisms to make themselves accountable to the people. In June 2002, Cardinal Mahony told the press in Dallas that the bishops couldn't give certain oversight powers to the people, because canon law forbade it. In effect, he was saying the bishops could not be accountable to the people, because they owed their first loyalty to the pope.

Any honest American bishop will tell us, off the record, that they would like to be accountable, that they could best serve their people by asking them what kind of ministers they want, maybe even launch local synods, and/or a national synod, with lay representation, to come to a consensus on the questions that vex American Catholics these days. They are asking not only about the sex-crisis, but posing even more radical questions that revolve around the nature of the priesthood itself.

What do we do about our priests? Do we reform seminary training? Do we ordain married men? Eliminate mandatory celibacy? Refuse ordination to homosexuals? Ordain women? De-clericalize the U.S. Church? Take an even more radical look at ministry itself? Go back to models in the primitive Church, where no one was really "ordained" and lay people, often lay women, presided over the Eucharistic meal? These questions should be answered by the people who are, after all, the very folks the bishops are bound to serve.

To be sure, it would take some courage for the U.S. bishops to go to their people and ask them how they want to be served. From Rome's point of view, that would look like democracy. And everyone knows the Church isn't a democracy. I think I can safely say that Rome wouldn't let the American Church decide on even the least of these proposals-to ordain married men. Rome has turned down at least three requests from the bishops of Oceania to ordain viri probati.

In the 1980s some 50 Brazilian bishops tentatively agreed to ordain a number of their catechists-in 50 dioceses on the same day-sure that Rome would not dismiss all 50 of them. My informant tells me they didn't go through with their plan, that "cold feet or an espirit-de-corps or the machine took over." Now I hear that two Brazilian bishops are quietly ordaining viri probati. Maybe they resonate with the Nike commercials: They Just Do It. I am sure they can justify their action by citing an old adage, that Necessity Knows No Law, and that it's more important for them to provide their people with the Eucharist than support the Patriarch of Rome in his insistence on celibacy.

But that doesn't strike me as a solution that would appeal to most bishops. For the most part, bishops enjoy being bishops. A theologian of my acquaintance has a vivid phrase. "Bishops rest assured that they rest assured." But I saw bishops grow bold in conciliar Rome, and I dare say that if they came together in another council, they would complete and codify the process of decentralization and inculturation that was begun at Vatican II—which would be a giant step toward giving the Church back to the people.

Until that happens (let's not hold our breath), the American bishops could call a national synod, as they did three times in the 19th century, when they mounted three Councils of Baltimore, to write new rules for the U.S. Church. They can still do that. Section 443 of canon law; paragraph #3 says that up to fifty percent of the delegates to a national synod can be "non-bishops." If the bishops had the courage to ask the people at large to elect their own delegates to, say, a Fourth Council of Baltimore, then we might expect to see something like the Constitutional Convention of 1787 in Philadelphia, where the Founding Fathers ended up creating the machinery of a modern democracy.
In an inculturated American Church, we could build something on that governmental model: an elected chief executive (or executive council), an elected judiciary, an elected legislative branch, even a bi-cameral legislature with a House of Bishops (also elected by the people) and a House of Commons, with each branch providing checks and balances to the others. Then American Catholics would be well on their way to creating their own kind of accountable (and thoroughly American) Church. A people's Church.

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