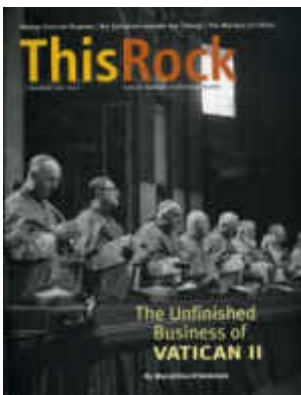


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The Unfinished Business of Vatican II

[Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio](#)



Patience Required

In 1968, just three short years after the close of the Second Vatican Council, a famous French Jesuit, came to the US on a speaking tour. Fr. Henri de Lubac, later to be created Cardinal by Pope John Paul II, was one of the most famous “periti” or theological experts who advised bishops during the council. After one of his scheduled speeches, a woman raised her hand and, given the floor, explained how alarmed she was that some very clear directives of the Council had not yet been put into practice. Fr de Lubac smiled and explained that the Council of Trent (1546-1564)

had mandated the creation of the first seminary system in the history of the Church. He then pointed out that it took 150 years for that vision to be made a reality.

Information technology and lines of communication were much better in 1965 than 1565. But human nature doesn't change from century to century. It takes time to change structures and even more time to change people. Our goal in this essay is first to identify the primary goals of the council and some of its specific directives. Next we'll look at a few notable ways that the Council's wishes have been turned into reality. Finally, we'll discuss some important things that are yet to be done and some areas where it would appear that we've even dropped the ball.

Goal of the Council

From key speeches of Popes John XXIII and Paul VI to the opening lines of Councils four Constitutions, it is clear that goals of this council were primarily pastoral. This council was a response to a very serious pastoral crisis as opposed to a dogmatic one. The problem was that the European nations that had formerly made up “Christendom” had become a spiritual wasteland. Even France, the “eldest daughter of the Church,” had become a mission



country. The working class, the intelligensia, and the youth of Western Europe had been almost entirely lost. In the US churches were full, but vulnerable. The tidal wave of cultural revolution, rising in the early sixties and breaking in 1968, would wash a good deal of that Church away.

The goal of the council was to equip the Church to effectively re-evangelize the world through a compelling proclamation of Jesus Christ in a language that the world could understand (*ecclesia ad extra*). Division among Christians is of course a tremendous hindrance to this, hence the Council's commitment to effective ecumenism.

But weak, lifeless Christians also make evangelization quite difficult. As the atheist philosopher, Nietzsche once said, "if Christians want me to believe in their Redeemer, they need to look more redeemed." So a great deal of the Council's attention was devoted to the inner life of the Church (*ecclesia ad intra*) in an effort to revitalize Christians by reconnecting them with the sources of faith and life (*ressourcement*), namely, the liturgy, the Bible, and the Fathers of the Church. In order to make these sources more accessible to ordinary people, a certain "updating" (***aggiornamento***) of language, images, customs and ceremonies would be required without any dilution of doctrine. Finally, there would have to be a deeper and more accurate self-understanding on the part of the Church, so that clergy and laity could better understand their respective roles in fulfilling the mission of evangelization entrusted to the Church by Christ (Mat



The Liturgy

If there is anything that Catholics in the pew know about Vatican II, it's that "Vatican II changed the Mass." But when asked to enumerate those changes, most mention the disappearance of Latin and the priest facing the people and not much more.

Interestingly enough, neither of these effects were mandated by the actual text of the council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC). But many other things were. First of all, the issue at hand was not only the Mass but the entire liturgy which includes all the public, official prayers of the Church. The Council wanted to renew every aspect of liturgical life—the Mass, all the sacraments, the divine office, the Roman Calendar, and the sacramentals or blessings of the Church as contained in the Roman Ritual. Without in any way wanting to discourage the life of devotional prayer that characterized Catholic piety (rosary, novenas, the stations of the Cross, etc), it wanted to assert the superiority of liturgical prayer over all other activities and once again make the entire liturgy the source and summit of Christian life (SC 7-10. It wanted to restore a greater communal meaning and experience to all liturgical celebrations

and encourage the active, conscious participation of the laity in them as well. This active participation, in fact, was the aim to be considered before all else in the revisions the council mandated for all dimensions of the liturgy (SC 34).

The actual revision of liturgical books was a task that went beyond what the council could achieve in its four short years. So a post-conciliar commission was appointed, known as “the Concilium,” that carried out the revisions, with final texts requiring the approval of the Roman Pontiff prior to promulgation.

There is much controversy among loyal Catholics about the translations of texts and the way in which changes were implemented. To address these issues would go beyond the scope of this article. But undoubtedly there have been many wonderful achievements that are often today simply taken for granted. The first to note would be the revised lectionary (SC 35). Prior to the Council, there was very little of the Old Testament ever read in the Mass of the Roman rite. In the new lectionary, in contrast, we have an Old Testament reading in every Sunday Mass which is carefully coordinated with the gospel in such a way that they illumine each other. They, together with the psalm and epistle, are arranged in a three year cycle so that Sunday Mass-goers hear the highlights of the entire Bible over three years. A similar cycle of daily readings helps daily communicants able to review the most salient passages of the entire Bible in two years. The council's desire that the people of God be exposed to a much richer diet of God's word in the liturgy has been accomplished.

In a similar way, the liturgy of the hours (SC 83-101) went from a one week to a four week cycle of psalms. The antiphons and readings for the seasons of the year and saints days give all who participate a profound access to the Catholic tradition. The Office of Readings is filled with substantial biblical passages with accompanying selections from the Fathers, Doctors, and councils that dovetail both with the biblical reading and the Feast or liturgical season being celebrated.

A few other solid liturgical achievements should also be briefly noted: 1) the restoration of concelebration (SC 57) and a greater sense of the liturgy as a communal rather than just a personal act; 2) a revision of the calendar that keeps our focus more on the paschal mystery and the seasons than on saints' memorials; 3) the revised rite of blessings or sacramentals (SC 79) that powerfully brings the liturgy into daily, secular life with rites that in many cases laity can lead; 4) the restoration of the Eucharistic prayer to an audible prayer (it used to be whispered and called “the Secret”) standing at the center of the celebration and the introduction of several Eucharistic prayers in addition to our beloved Roman Canon.

Yet there is much left to do. The principle underlying the revision of the Roman Rite was supposed to be “noble simplicity”(SC 34). Many seem to have interpreted this to mean “casual simplicity.” The Fathers of the Council had no intention to encourage lack of reverence or a lessening of a sense of awe and

amazement by making the liturgy more accessible and understandable. Yet it is hard not to notice a ho-hum attitude on the part of many clergy and laity which is discernable through word, posture, dress, and facial expression when participating in the official worship of the Church.

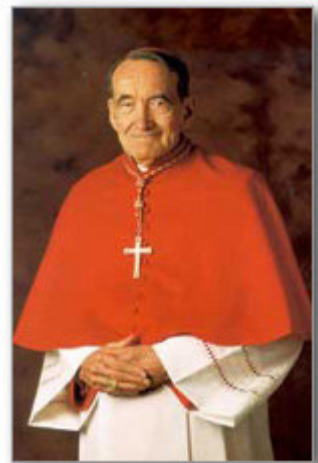
The criterion that was to be highest of all in carrying out liturgical reform was “the full, conscious, and active participation” of the laity in the liturgy (SC 14). In fact, the phrase “active participation” occurs 15 times and can be said to be the refrain of the council’s Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy.

We see much more outward participation now than we did prior to the council—lay lectors, ushers, even extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, offertory processions, musicians, etc. Yet this more extensive outward participation had as its aim encouraging a more intensely inward, spiritual engagement in the liturgy. Speaking of the laity’s participation in the Mass, the Council says: “Offering the immaculate victim, not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, they should learn to offer themselves.” (SC 48). The council mandated changes in the sacramentals and the liturgy of the hours in part so that they could be fruitfully and regularly used by the faithful to sanctify every dimension of life and every hour of the day. Yet few laity even know of the existence of the revised “Book of Blessings” or have any idea how to participate in the liturgy of the hours.

This ultimate goal of the council’s liturgical reform—the inner, life-changing participation of the faithful in every aspect of liturgical life-- is still far off on the horizon. The next great frontier to conquer over the next several decades must be the spiritual appropriation of the liturgical teaching of the council. It is one thing to rewrite texts. It is quite another to transform hearts. But if we fail to press on to the level of the mind, heart and daily life, we will have betrayed the true intent of the council fathers and of the Holy Spirit himself. Clearly, evangelization, catechesis, and spiritual renewal of clergy and laity alike will be required to move beyond reform of rites to renewal of lives.

The Church as Communion

The Second Vatican Council’s teaching on the nature and mission of the Church is extensive. A full treatment of it would demand an entire book, not an essay such as this. Here we’ll limit ourselves to only a few observations on the broadest features. The first thing to note is the fundamental model of the Church in the Council documents. Cardinal Avery Dulles, in his famous book ***Models of the Church***, points out that all of us at least subconsciously operate with a fundamental paradigm of what the Church of Christ is and ought to do. Following the Protestant Reformation, which tended to minimize the



apostolic structure and visible nature of the Church, Catholic theologians felt compelled to defend the Church as an institution and visible society, leading to an emphasis on the hierarchy and their governmental authority. Vatican II, while reaffirming the Church's hierarchical character, wished instead to return the more biblical and patristic vision of the Church as a communion of persons flowing from the loving relationship of the three divine persons of the Most Holy Trinity. This "communio ecclesiology" undergirds all the council's documents and is commented on widely after the council by, among others, John Paul II and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI. It colors the Catechism of the Catholic Church, one of the great achievements of the post-conciliar period which can be seen as a synthesis and popular expression of the Council's teaching. The Code of Canon law was even revised in 1983 so that law and governmental structures would follow the priority of personal relationship with God and with one another.

So the Communio ecclesiology of the council has had great impact in many respects. Yet regrettably, the way in which the pastoral structures of the Church function on a day to day basis often appear untouched by the vision of the Church as a communio. One example of this is with regard to the role of bishop in a diocese. The bishop is primarily a father whose role it is to teach, pastor, and sanctify the faithful and in a special way, the brother priests and deacons who assist him in carrying out his pastoral mission. Yet still in many circumstances, the bishop functions more as an administrator than as a father. One of the seldom noted causes of the priestly pedophilia scandal, in our view, is that few bishops really know their priests personally. Priests' training, selection, and assignments are usually delegated to others. In the one of the first pedophilia lawsuits against an American diocese, it emerged that a lengthy letter was written to the bishop from one of his priests detailed the alarming and inappropriate activity of another priest later convicted of abominable crimes. The jury was shocked to learn that the letter was never even read by the bishop but was rather reviewed by the bishop's staff. There are some things that can and must be delegated to assistants by any leader. But if the church is first and foremost a communion of persons, a family as it were, personal care and communication cannot be totally delegated. If a bishop or pastor becomes inaccessible, barricaded behind various levels of committees, we are dealing with bureaucracy and not communio.



The Laity, Tradition, and Religious Education.

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (DV), was one of the last documents of the Council to be finalized because the issues it treated were so delicate and complex. One of those issues was the nature of tradition. The Council of Trent, in the face of the Protestant revolt, had reaffirmed the authority of "traditions" as well as Scripture. But it never really described the nature of Tradition and its special

role in the transmission of revealed truth. This is precisely one of the great achievements of *Dei Verbum*, drawing on important theological spadework done by Yves Congar and others. The content of Tradition cannot be limited to specific doctrines or practices, but consists rather in “all that the Church is and believes (DV 8). It is an entire heritage, a vision of God and indeed of all reality, that is passed on from generation to generation under the watchful eye of the bishops, the successors of the apostles, with laity and clergy participating in the process as in “a single, common effort” (DV 10). There are aspects of Tradition’s content that must be “caught” and not simply taught. That is to say that it needs to be passed on through living practice and prayer.

This deeper insight into the rich content and distinct process of Tradition has many implications that were understood by the council Fathers. The family, the domestic church, is the place where impressionable young people spend the most time and so must be the key place where the transmission of the Catholic Tradition must take place. Parents must be recognized, says the Council, as the primary religious educators of their children and must be equipped for this task with adequate formation in Christian doctrine (LG 35; AA 28-32).

The religious education programs in many Catholic parishes have not yet caught up with this conciliar vision. If they had, adult education and parenting courses would be top priority in parish religious education programs. Though some strides have been made in this direction (the RCIA is one), by and large adult education outside of RCIA is regarded as an optional extra. Evangelical Churches generally put Catholic parishes to shame in the emphasis placed on continuing adult education which is focused on bible study, parenting and Christian family life.

Ecumenism and Evangelization

The Second Vatican Council’s decrees on Ecumenism (UR), the Apostolate of the Laity (AA), and Missions (AGD) all outline the vigorous apostolic action of the part of the entire Church, clergy and laity, in the areas of Ecumenism and Evangelization, which are targeted as twin pastoral priorities of the age. All are to be engaged in praying and working for the restoration of full Christian unity and the proclamation of the Gospel to all who need to hear it, from the primitive peoples in remote, unevangelized corners of the world to the inactive Catholic next door.

Despite the flurry of ecumenical activity immediately after the council, today we see virtually no ecumenical awareness at the parish level, at least in the US. Petitions for Christian unity seldom appears in the prayer of the faithful. There is little talk about the topic and even less action. Probably the most fruitful ecumenical collaboration in the US has been in the prolife movement where Evangelicals and Catholics have stood shoulder to shoulder on picket lines and at crisis pregnancy centers. And without cooperation between Protestants and

Catholics, Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ" would have never made it past the Hollywood blockade into the mainstream of American life. This is progress from where things stood in 1962, but much more needs to be done.

Our worst record, perhaps, is in the area of evangelization. Vatican II proclaimed evangelization as top priority, saying that the task of carrying the gospel of Jesus Christ to those who have not yet accepted it is more urgent now than ever (AGD 1 and 7). All must be involved in this work not only through witness of life but in words as well, able and ready to provide a reason for the hope they have in Christ (AA6 and AGD 23). All the forms of social communication must be utilized, including modern mass media.

Yet forty years after the Council, in a nation that is 22% Catholic, there are many major metropolitan areas that do not have a single Catholic radio station. The Eternal Word Television Network has been a remarkable story of perseverance and faith, but it is sad that it has often been in spite of rather than with the support of many bishops and diocesan structures. Finding a parish where the evangelization of the inactive and the unchurched has any prominent place in the parish mission statement is rare—to find a parish where there is any effective training in such evangelization is even rarer. The vast majority of Catholics, including not a few clergy, don't have the faintest idea of where to start to bring an unchurched person to faith in Christ and participation in the life of the Church. Clearly, when it comes to making evangelization a top priority, we've dropped the ball.

The Task at Hand

Fortunately, when someone fumbles the ball, a teammate is free to pick it up and run it across the goal line. The story about Trent and the seminary system should encourage us that it is not too late to pick up the work of implementing the Council and move it towards completion. In all the areas we have spoken about—inward liturgical renewal, a shift in religious education, the triumph of a true *communio ecclesiology*, and effective commitment to ecumenism and evangelization—the task is not changing texts or structures. Rather, it is about changing people. Human beings are creatures of habit. And habits take time to change. And when you are trying to change attitudes and habits of a community one billion strong, change simply takes a *long* time and a lot of energy.

So it should not surprise us that forty years after the close of the Council, much of the council's vision remains to be implemented, regardless of all the great things that have been accomplished. Much prayer and hard work lie ahead of us. But I can think of one intercessor whose prayers we can count on for assistance—the late Pope John Paul II. This pontiff, who many believe should be called "the Great," assumed the double name of the two popes of the Second Vatican Council in order to demonstrate that his entire pontificate was dedicated to the implementation of that council's directives. He refused to cease in his

labors, even when declining health removed much of the zip from his step. May he refuse to cease praying for us as we seek to carry out his unfinished work.

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Vatican II: The Real Story

By: [Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio](#)



Some in the Catholic Church love Vatican II because they think it finally brought the Catholic Church out of the dark ages. Some suspect the Second Vatican Council because they fear it sold out faithfulness to the truth in favor of current opinion.

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