

THE PARADOX OF VATICAN II: THEOLOGY IN A NEW MILLENNIUM

Robert J. Schreiter
Inauguration of the Vatican Council II Chair
The Bernardin Center at Catholic Theological Union

April 14, 2002

The Vatican Council II Chair

It is assuredly a moment of grace that the first academic chair to be inaugurated under the auspices of the Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Center be dedicated to the study of the Second Vatican Council. Time and again in his fourteen years as Archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Bernardin reasserted that the implementation of the directives of the Second Vatican Council stood at the center of his ministry. As a young bishop he had attended the closing sessions of the Council. The two bishops who were his special mentors, Paul Hallinan of Atlanta and John Dearden of Detroit, had both been profoundly transformed by their experience of participation in the Council. Cardinal Bernardin's own work as a bishop remains for many of us the quintessential example of what it means to lead the Church in the style intended by the Council.¹

That this chair should be located at Catholic Theological Union only heightens the significance of Cardinal Bernardin's contribution. Upon receiving an honorary doctorate from this institution in 1988, he called upon CTU to help him, in a special way, to study further and to continue to implement the teachings of the Council. Two years later, in 1990, he chose CTU as the site at which he wished to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the close of the Council. In that speech, he noted "that the Catholic Theological Union was itself a result of conciliar teaching and innovation,"² and that he was "especially delighted to know that the council's documents have been the object of intensified research and discussion" at this institution.

The Second Vatican Council was undoubtedly the most significant theological event for the Roman Catholic Church in the twentieth century. It formed a watershed in the flow of theological thought: commentators and theologians regularly divide the century into the pre-Vatican II and post-Vatican II eras. Central to that division was the Council's attempt to engage the modern world--a particularly special theme of Cardinal Bernardin-- after a century in which it had seen itself as a bulwark against that very same world. Moreover, coming to fruition as it did in the 1960's, it intersected with powerful social and cultural influences that magnified its effects in many parts of the world.

This lecture to inaugurate the Vatican Council II Chair of Theology will be in two parts. In the first part, some of the signal achievements of the Council will be noted, as they

¹See in this regard his "Changes in Styles of Episcopal Leadership," in Alphonse P. Spilly (ed.), *Selected Works of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), II, 353-362.

²Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, "Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Revisited--25 Years Later," in *ibid.*, II, 158.

appear to us some forty years on, especially their impact on the Church itself and on the larger world. In the second part, I will attempt an assessment of where we find ourselves now with the Council's teachings and influence, in the beginning years of the new millennium.

What the Council Achieved

In the course of its four sessions from 1962 to 1965, the Council produced sixteen documents. I would like to highlight those documents that brought about the most change within the Church and in the Church's dealing with the modern world.. The documents will be grouped according to four themes: the liturgy, the self-understanding of the Church, the Church in a pluralist world, and the mission of the Church in the world.

One can read the Council as having put a seal of approval on some movements in the Church (such as the biblical renewal), thus bringing some previously controversial issues to a settlement; one can read others (such as the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*) as inaugurating a vision and an agenda that we are still trying to achieve. Both of these perspectives will be kept in mind as the documents of the Council are examined for their meaning for us as we move into a new century.

The Liturgy

The first document to be issued was the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*. A number of different factors were at play in taking this document up first over, say, the dogmatic constitution on the Church. For one, the historical and pastoral work on the reform of the liturgy, that by that time stretched over several decades, was in many ways already well advanced. This work needed to be affirmed and adopted at the highest level of the Church. But there were deeper, theological reasons at work beyond this seemingly pragmatic one. To move from the Tridentine notion of liturgy as largely expressive or representational of transcendent realities, back to a more patristic model of liturgy comprising the full, active, and conscious participation by all the baptized in the praise and worship of God, would mean a profound shift in sensibility and awareness on the part of all believers, and mark a decidedly different stance toward the larger world. To engage the laity as more than spectators or to consign them to a parallel piety alongside that of the liturgical ministers presented a different vision of the Church itself. The Church could no longer be considered an alternative society consisting chiefly of the clergy, with the laity as largely uninvolved. The Church would be, through such participation, a whole different kind of reality, both internally and to the outside world. In other words, the theme of participation, implying an acknowledgment of the dignity and worth of each person, would ring clearly in the very heart of the Church--in its principal activity, the praise and worship of God.

The decision to have the presider at the liturgy face the people, something that came about in implementing the Constitution, also had a seismic impact. Heretofore, the action of the priest and the worship of the people had been clearly separated, as the communion railing had signified in much church architecture. Now that barrier seemed out of place,

and railings were removed in many churches. The liturgical action no longer was directed to some point beyond the people and the priest, but happened in the very midst of the assembly. That lay readers and Eucharistic ministers were to become commonplace flowed naturally from this rearrangement of symbolic space, for liturgy became the celebration of the entire People of God. Despite attempts in the subsequent decades to reintroduce a sense of separation between priest and people, the liturgical experience in such symbolic space militated against any return to the old sense of division. This had its effect not only on the self-consciousness of priest and people, it also changed many people's theology. Their understanding of God and the presence of God also underwent a transformation. God seemed to draw nearer and be less forbidding than had been the case.

Although the Constitution itself may not have envisioned that the Eucharist would be celebrated completely in vernacular languages, it became harder to retain any Latin in the liturgical rites. The move to local languages placed the final stamp on this new sense of participation, confirming an engagement with people's sense of themselves as free, participating agents in their own future.

The Church

While the Constitution on the Liturgy set the stage, as it were, for a renewed understanding of the Church, it was the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, that became the charter for renewal and reform. Although the document reflects the struggle of the bishops to come to a single understanding of the Church, it nonetheless represents a significant departure from an understanding of the Church that had prevailed for four centuries.

Five significant developments stand out. First of all, the efforts to come to a new understanding of the Church itself. This is evidenced in the tension one senses in reading chapters two and three of the Constitution. Chapter two, on the Church as the People of God, presents a vision of a people on pilgrimage together into the Reign of God, a theme re-echoed in chapter seven. Chapter three, on the hierarchical nature of the Church, sets out to balance the vision of chapter two by reasserting a traditional view of hierarchy within the Church. Many of the post-Vatican II tensions play themselves out around the intersection of these two views. People part of modernity read in the image of the People of God a more democratic, egalitarian vision of the Church, perhaps more than the text allows. In the United States, hearing the phrase "People of God" seemed to many to be reminiscent of "We, the people," the beginning words of the U.S. Constitution. But it was something of an inevitable reading, given the context in which the Church found itself in the latter half of the twentieth century.

However one reads the tension between these two visions, what was affirmed was that the Church is a mystery, i.e., a pathway to salvation ordained by God. Thus, it stands as more as a human than an utterly divine institution, an idea that had been enshrined in Catholic ecclesiology since the time of Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) of the Church as a "perfect society." Moreover, the Constitution calls the Church a sacrament, mirroring forth the divine reality in the world.

Secondly, alongside what appeared to some to be competing understandings of the Church, there unfolds a new understanding of the relation of the local churches to the universal Church. In Vatican II, there emerged an understanding of the Church as consisting of a communion of particular or local churches, in communion with and under the leadership of the Church of Rome. Within that communion, each local church (understood as a diocese) represented the fullness of what it meant to be Church, even though it did not represent the entire Church. This recovery of a patristic understanding of the Church stands as one of the major achievements of the Council. Building on this theological foundation, the Council goes on to articulate a collegial understanding of the relationship of the bishops to one another and to the Pope, that is, that their relationship is one of mutuality and respect. Bishops are therefore not branch managers of a transnational organization, but are the leaders of communions that are in turn in communion with one another and with the head of this collegium, the Bishop of Rome. Such thinking opened the way for reimagining how decisions might be made, and through Paul VI's promulgation of a plan for a regular meeting of a synod of bishops, how the Church itself might come to be led and governed. The latter was not to be, however, when it became clear that the synods would be only advisory to the Pope, and not have a share in governance of the world-wide Church.

In a third development, the Roman Catholic Church repositioned itself vis-à-vis the other Christian Churches. In a debated but finally accepted move, the Council defined the Church in no. 8 of *Lumen gentium* as "subsisting" in the Catholic Church, rather than positing a simple identification of the Roman Catholic Church with the whole and true Church of Christ. This was elaborated in the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, which was issued on the same day as *Lumen gentium*. With this, a whole new relationship to the other Christian Churches was opened up where there had been before an attitude toward them of rejection as having no part in the "true Church." By speaking of its own relation to the Church of Christ in this way, a space was cleared for ecumenical relations that had not been there before.

A fourth significant development can be found in the fourth chapter, on the laity. As has been noted, a sense of lay involvement both within the Church and in witness and ministry in the world had been growing steadily for decades prior to the Council. In 1965, the Council also issued a Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam actuositatem*, that acknowledged and confirmed calling of the laity to their full status within the Church.

Finally, the Council in its Decree on Religious Life, *Perfectae caritatis*, in 1965, called for a renewal of religious institutes by retrieving the charism of their founding figures and repositioning them in the modern world. This set off a ferment in religious institutes that led to considerable experimentation with new forms, based on reading original charisms in modern contexts. Many religious institutes recommitted themselves to ministries of seeking justice--again, building upon decades of Catholic social teaching, but giving a focus in their activities that had not been there previously.

All in all, these developments in re-envisioning the Church--as a mystery, not a perfect society; as a communion of communions, not a center and periphery; as not identified as the sole and complete representation of the Church of Christ; with a place for the laity; and with renewed religious institutes--fundamentally reshaped how the Roman Catholic Church might live in the modern world

The Church in a Pluralist World

One of the features of modernity, with its concern for autonomous spheres of knowledge, is that it fosters the growth of pluralism, that is, different and sometimes competing views of the world. The Council engaged that pluralism on a number of different fronts.

One of those fronts was the question of freedom of conscience. In the wider world, at least in the West of that time and in many of the so-called developing countries, freedom of conscience had come to be seen as a human right. Human rights had been a hallmark development of Enlightenment thinking, already evident at the end of the eighteenth century in declarations arising out of the American and French revolutions. .

While Catholic social teaching defended many human rights, the question of freedom of conscience and its attendant aspect, freedom of religion, had not made its way into official Catholic teaching. The adage “error has no rights” better portrayed official thinking. But that was to change in 1965 with the Council’s Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis humanae*.

Much of the groundwork for this Declaration had been done by the American theologian John Courtney Murray, S.J. Indeed this declaration was certainly the major U.S. contribution to the work of the Council. Murray’s concern had been finding a theological way for U.S. Catholics to live in a religiously plural, largely Protestant culture. But concerns about religious liberty were important too for Catholics living as minorities in countries where the pluralism was non-Christian, and also for those who were living in atheistic states under Soviet hegemony.

Dignitatis humanae not only squarely made the religious freedom of the individual part of official Church teaching. It also represents one of the most fundamental reversals of the Church’s stance toward the modern world. Pius IX in his *Syllabus of Errors* had condemned such ideas as the separation of Church and state, or that there could be more religions present in the state than Roman Catholicism. In *Dignitatis humanae*, the reverse position was being taken.

Another major development was the attitude of the Church to other religions. Already in *Lumen Gentium* (no. 16) a more positive attitude had been taken to the possibility of salvation outside Christianity. Throughout the century the Church had been moving away from the exclusivist position of no salvation outside the Church that had characterized the Church since medieval times. But in *Lumen gentium*, and again in the Decree on Missionary Activity *Ad gentes* the door is left open for God’s saving activity through other religions, without defining how such activity occurs. The influence of the work on what is

call the theology of religions by such figures as Yves Congar and Karl Rahner are in evidence here.

In its Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra aetate*, the Council addresses other religions specifically, but especially Judaism. Pope John XXIII had begun a change by eliminating the reference to the “perfidious” Jews from the intercessions on Good Friday. But *Nostra aetate* sets out to reverse a long history of anti-Judaism and blaming all Jews for the death of Christ. Moreover, it rejects the belief that the New Covenant inaugurated by Christ means Jews have been “rejected or accursed” by God, and it condemns “all hatreds, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism leveled at any time or from any source against the Jews.” (no. 4) *Nostra aetate* has been the platform upon which a wholly new approach to Catholic-Jewish relations is being built.

The reference to other traditions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam) is rather summary, but in all instances there is an attempt to make a positive statement about each religion. The positive evaluation of these traditions made possible the prospect of interreligious dialogue at the highest level, and put a stamp of approval on attempts already under way.

The attempts to deal with religious pluralism at the Council, therefore, set a new agenda for the Church, one that proposed closer contact without resolving the theological issues of the relation between the salvation offered in Christ and the offers made in these other traditions. It remains, however, one of the great accomplishments of the Council that these dialogues have been initiated and, especially, that such a resolute stand has been taken against anti-Semitism.

The Mission of the Church to the World

A renewed sense of the Church entailed more than internal reform and renewal, or a revised set of relationships with other communions and religions. The question had to be raised about just how the Church would engage the world itself as a modern world. Two documents addressed that issue in a special way: the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, *Ad gentes divinitus*, and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, both issued at the final session of the Council.

The decree on missionary activity presented a theology of mission that made mission more than a peripheral activity by a few specialists; being missionary was the very identity of the Church itself. Mission is born in the action of the Trinity, whereby God is made known to us through the Incarnation and the sending of the Holy Spirit. The Church “is by its very nature missionary” (no. 2) as the extension of God’s saving work through the Son and the Spirit.

What is remarkable is how such a vision of mission is different from seeing mission as forays into a world marked by depredation and sin, attempting to rescue a few embattled souls. Here again we see a more positive engagement with the world on the part of the Church, whereby the Church strives to share its message of salvation in Christ with the larger world.

The optimism about engaging the world is most evident in the final document of the Council, *Gaudium et spes*, captured so well in the opening words of the Pastoral Constitution: “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and the anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.” (no. 1) The Church seeks solidarity here with what it calls “the whole human family.” The document goes on to outline a vision of the human, based upon the dignity of each human person in the image and likeness of God. In no. 29, it discusses justice as an essential quality for all. It notes the rightful autonomy of earthly affairs (no. 36)--again a far cry from *The Syllabus of Errors*--and what the Church has to contribute to the modern world. Its concern with human culture and its development (nos. 53-62) show how deeply it is engaged with the world, and what it might become. *Gaudium et spes* was promulgated as a Pastoral Constitution, a new genre in conciliar documents. It sought to address the world pastorally, not polemically, and embodies the spirit that Pope John XXIII had hoped would suffuse the entire Council.

Where We Have Come: The Paradox of Vatican II

Scores, indeed hundreds of books have been written about Vatican II, and will no doubt continue to be written. Nearly four decades after its conclusion, it is perhaps still too early to trace the full force of its impact.

The Council concluded at time of great euphoria. Modernity was at its height; belief in the possibility of a grand project to reform society was strong. Catholics plunged into the task of implementing the work of the Council with great enthusiasm. A group of theologians who had been influential at the Council founded the international journal *Concilium* to continue the renewal in theology that the Council had endorsed. In North America and Europe, interest in experimentation to find more adequate and appropriate forms for worship, a greater lay voice in the Church, the reform of religious institutes, and the quest for justice energized many people. In Latin America, the meeting of the bishops at Medellín in 1968 signaled a new commitment to the poor and to the cause of their liberation from poverty and oppression. In Asia, interest in interreligious dialogue rose dramatically. In Africa, the missionary role was being re-evaluated in light of the teaching of *Ad gentes*. The energy and ferment in the Church was palpable.

Alongside the agenda for social justice, another issue made itself felt first in Africa and then throughout Asia and Oceania, beginning in the late 1960's. The Council had sent two messages that came together in a powerful way. One message was the need to adapt the Church to local circumstances in so-called mission countries. The Church since the time of Pius XI had been noting this need. But the other message coming from the Council, regarding the importance of culture and cultural development, provided a theological underpinning for such adaptation which carried it further than a mere pragmatic concern. By the end of the 1970's this new emphasis was being called *inculturation*. The theme of culture was to become an integral part of the message of Pope John Paul II, especially in

his travels. While great attention has been given to this theme, many have been disappointed that so little inculturation has been allowed.

The euphoria created by the Council became more muted, perhaps inevitably so, as the decades rolled on. Some theologians who had been supportive and in some instances instrumental in the work of the Council felt that the zeal for reform and renewal had gone too far in coming to terms with modernity. They pulled back from the reform and showed a great deal of worry about the Church's identity, fearing it was becoming diluted in its accommodation to modernity, and that the agenda of the world was setting too much of the agenda for the Church. The international journal *Communio* was established to counteract what was felt to be the overly progressive tone of *Concilium*.

That the Synods of Bishops were to be but advisory to the Pope, and not have the authority to legislate for the Church, came as a disappointment to those who hoped that the Council would not be the end of the reform, but an impetus to continuing reform. Nonetheless, the early Synods, especially those on justice and evangelization, produced remarkable documents.

During the long pontificate of Pope John Paul II, the concern for justice has continued to be voiced loudly and clearly, although liberation theology, one of its most notable manifestations, was largely suppressed. Some of the more progressive elements in the reform appeared to be increasingly contained. A special Synod was convoked in 1985 to create a kind of official interpretation of Vatican II. The "People of God" theme as an ecclesial image was replaced with the theme of the Church as "communio," to be sure an ancient image of the Church dating back to patristic times, but one now ideologically tinged to reassert the importance of hierarchy. A new universal catechism was also developed and published, the first such catechism to be issued since the time of the Council of Trent, to clarify the teaching of the Church amid the plurality of voices and theologies. A more conservative look to the Church became more and more apparent from the late 1980's, both in episcopal appointments and the emergence of groups seeking some of the uniformity and clarity that the turbulence of the post-conciliar years had obscured.

Where is the enduring impact of the Council at the beginning of the twenty-first century? To interpret the impact of the Council merely as a swing from euphoria to a more sober, even pessimistic view may prove to be shortsighted. I would like to suggest that three paradoxes are coming more and more into evidence. They stand as things to ponder as we think about and work with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council in a new millennium.

First of all, the Council was convoked to deal with problems of the modern world and the Church's relation to that world. In retrospect, it is clear that the "modern world" it was addressing was that of Europe and North America. Even though there was representation from all continents present, the agenda was really aimed at those two continents and their problem of secularization. By the mid-1970's, the balance of the Christian population had shifted to the southern hemisphere. While Catholics in Europe and North America may feel their agenda is not being addressed, there is a much larger picture to look at.

I believe that the Second Vatican Council continues to be solid ground upon which to address the issues that will ever more clearly be the agenda of a world Church.³ To name but two: the fastest growing form of Christianity today is Pentecostal or charismatic Christianity. What will that mean for the Roman Catholic Church? Pluralism, especially religious pluralism, is even more on the agenda today than it was forty years ago; the instruction *Dominus Iesus* is, in the eyes of most people, an inadequate response to that fact. How shall we deal with a resituated and changed Church and world, no longer at the high tide of modernity, but perhaps now in the uncertain waters of premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity all swirling around together?

A second paradox we face in the future is that more than half the time since the close of the Council has been in the pontificate of a pope who had little experience with the challenges of living the Christian message in a secularized and pluralist world. Pope John Paul II had spent only one year of his life outside his native Poland prior to assuming the Chair of Peter. His adult years were spent under authoritarian regimes. It is premature to assess his pontificate, I believe. His achievements have been many. His attitudes have also changed toward the West in the course of his pontificate; this is especially evident in his attitudes toward the United States. Yet clearly, his attitudes toward the course of world events and regarding the internal discipline of the Church will need to be assessed more closely to understand where we might go with the teachings of the Council in the twenty-first century.

The third paradox is one every generation of humanity faces. The generation which created the achievement of the Second Vatican Council is nearing life's end and has already passed away. Those who remember Catholic life before the Second Vatican Council are likewise aging. What this means is that the meaning of Vatican II will be less interpreted within a "pre-Vatican II/post-Vatican II" framework, and more from perspectives which are only starting now to emerge. Even the "action-reaction" model may soon become outdated. How the youngest generation will see the Council will become more evident in the coming years.

Whatever the future of the influence of Vatican II may be, it will take place in a world which will exhibit a great number of pluralities. Globalization has thrown people and cultures together in ways unprecedented. People, especially in global cities, exhibit a capacity of living lives floating between modernity, premodernity, and postmodernity. Horrendous gaps between rich and poor continue to threaten the world. Violence and terror have become expressive of the tensions which the world feels.

More than ever, the Church must live up to its catholicity. Trying to face the tensions of the world by imposing a uniformity so as to be monolithic in face of these issues has proven, for other institutions, to be a source of new violence. Surely adding to violence is not the intent of anyone within the Church.

³One provocative attempt to look at this question is Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

And here returning to the Council continues to be of benefit. The modern agenda has not been completely set aside, neither in the world or the Church. There are values and ideas that are needed as much as ever. The theme of participation, which so marked especially the Constitution on the Liturgy, becomes doubly important in a world where a global economy threatens to exclude people. The attempt to balance the local and the universal Church in a world where the local and the global collide remains a fresh theme. A vision of the dignity of the human person set forth so boldly in *Gaudium et spes* has lost none of its validity. The respecting of conscience, and the dialogue among religions at a time when violence is legitimated by an appeal to religion has more urgency now than at the time of the Council. And a concern for the world as a whole, in its joy and its hope, its grief and its anguish, rather than retreating from it, will always stand as a theological tenet of a Church that hopes to be a sacrament to and for the world of God's love and grace.

So the establishing of this Vatican Council II Chair of Theology by generous donors, under the auspices of the Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Center, provides a forum where these great issues can be thought through further, supported by the teaching of Council. For this we all are--and myself in particular--very grateful.