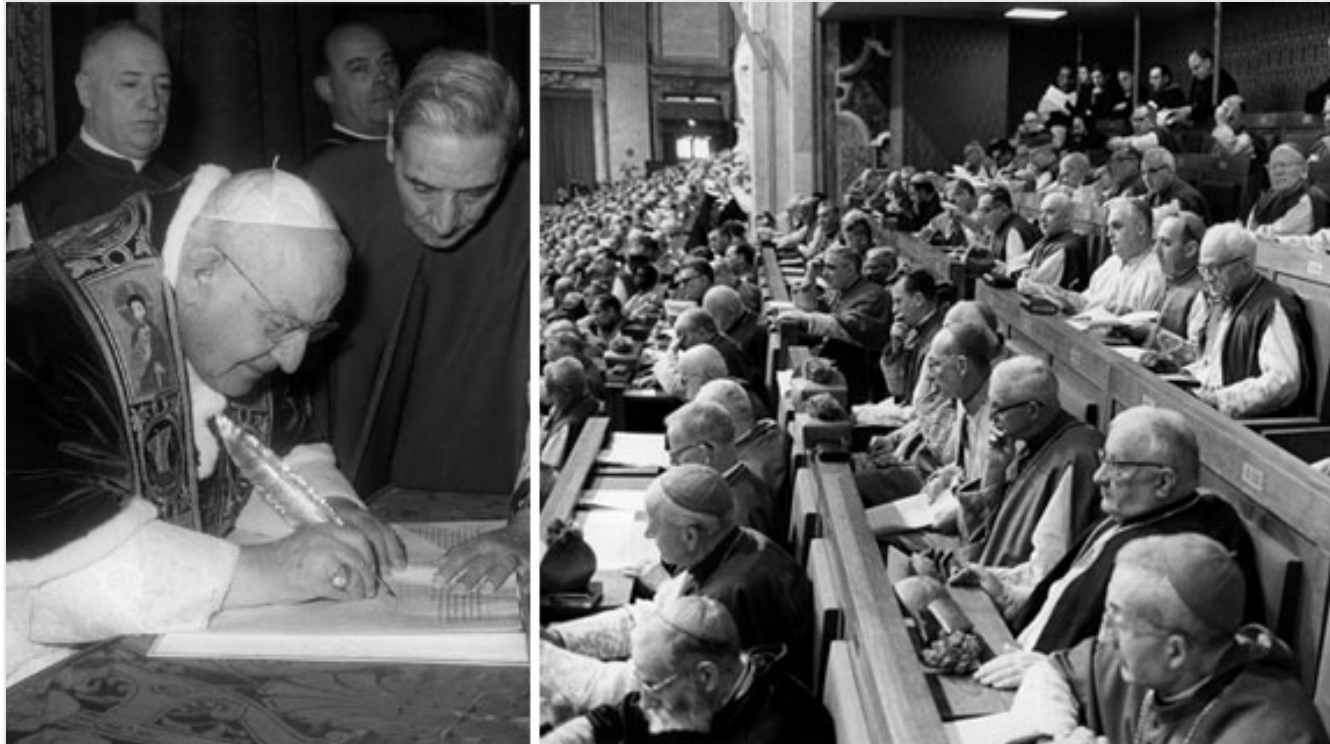


The True Spirit of Vatican II



Pope John XXIII signs the bull convoking the Second Vatican Council Dec. 25, 1961. Between 2,000 and 2,500 bishops attended each Vatican II session inside St. Peter's Basilica (CNS file photos).

As far as I know, no participant in the Second Vatican Council summed up its goals or described its spirit as addressing the question whether God's truth and love are effective, that is, whether they have the power to steer men on a course conforming to their dignity. Nevertheless, the overarching question that the Council did address leads to this question. For the Council Fathers the question was: "Ecclesia, quid dicis de te ipsa? Church, what do you say about yourself?" The context of the question is determinative of the Council's pastoral nature. The concern was not to produce a technical treatise of ecclesiology, but to respond to the spreading perception that the Church is no longer relevant, that it has nothing to offer to a humanity that has taken its future and the aspiration for a better world into its own hands.

Why the Council?

Just a few years after upheaval of World War II, with the Cold War coming to a head in the Cuban Missile Crisis, with historic revolutions taking place in technology, science, politics, economics, and culture, the Church found herself in a position similar to that of John the Baptist. He lived differently than his contemporaries, putting God first in every way, and he spoke with the authority of a prophet. He did this in the name of fidelity to the God who called him and fidelity to the vocation that God entrusted to him. He had a message, a lifestyle went with it, and a baptism of repentance that attracted great crowds. He could not be ignored. Everything about him provoked the question: "Quid dicis de te ipso? What do you say about yourself?" (Jn 1:22).

This is precisely the question put to the Church at the time of Vatican II: Can you give an account of

yourself, of your convictions and values and way of life, at a time when these are increasingly at odds with the surrounding culture and increasingly treated as irrelevant?

Could a Church that was so old, that had been there all along the way and evidently did not prevent the unprecedented assaults on human dignity of the twentieth century, make a credible case that it has something positive to offer? If, in looking to the past, this Church must acknowledge that its own members contributed to division among Christians and to a defensive, even hostile stance in relation to science and the modern democratic states, can this Church dare to say that it is not only not part of the problem but has a solution to offer? Is it not audacious for this Church, and thus contrary to the humility that it professes, to say to the world, in the words of Pope Paul VI: “I have that for which you search, that which you lack” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 95)?

The Church’s response to the crisis of humanity as it manifested itself in the middle of the twentieth century parallels what John’s Gospel says about the Baptist: “He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world” (Jn 1:7-9). The first words of the Council’s central document on the Church begin with this theme.

Christ is the Light of nations. Because this is so, this Sacred Synod gathered together in the Holy Spirit eagerly desires, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature, to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church (*Lumen gentium*, 1).

The Church’s mission is to point to Christ. She does this most effectively by reflecting His eternal light, and that light shines especially conspicuously in times of darkness. In his encyclical convoking the Council, *Humanae salutis*, Pope John XXIII envisioned that the Council would result in “vivifying the temporal order with the light of Christ.” The brutalities of the twentieth century had demonstrated what can happen in the name of progress and development that deliberately exclude any reference to God and set themselves against the Church. This could only constitute an urgent call for the Church, who knows when men do not acknowledge God neither are they able to acknowledge human dignity or set any limits to their own power and action. What was needed was a counter-demonstration.

The Church cannot sit on the sidelines, nor can she expend all of her energies in self-defense. It is true for the more than three centuries her contemporaries have distanced themselves from her. She has lost her privileged place in society as the dominant influence in men’s lives at least in part because they have become enamored with themselves, their thinking, their technology, their systems, all of which appear to be more relevant for daily life than an antiquated faith. Yet, it is also true that the Church had to examine her conscience^[1] to ask if she has in any way contributed to this modern divorce. For, unlike God, whose

charity and pedagogy are perfect, the Church's members are subject to any number of deficiencies and limited prudence.

The Church can allow neither her members' sins nor the destructive lust for autonomy of those who disregard her to have the last word. Her missionary mandate is not contingent on perfection, though she cannot cease to strive for it, but on humility and trust in God. Despite the difficulties, she desires "to contribute more efficaciously to the solution of the problems of the modern age." For this to occur, "This supernatural order must, however, reflect its efficiency in the other order, the temporal one." He would repeat this in his opening address: "If this doctrine is to make its impact on the various spheres of human activity—in private, family and social life—then it is absolutely vital that the Church shall never for an instant lose sight of that sacred patrimony of truth inherited from the Fathers" (Opening Speech).

The whole purpose of the Council, Pope John insisted, was to respond to the problems of mankind by bearing witness to the light of Christ. Nowhere did he make this clearer than in a radio broadcast exactly one month prior to the Council's opening. According to Cardinal Bea, who was appointed by Pope John as head of the Secretariat for Christian Unity and played an influential role during the Council, "Pope John has told us that the first idea of the Council came to him in connection with the problems concerning all men and particularly that of peace."^[2] The Pope's radio broadcast was "a solemn warning" occasioned by a review of the documents that had been prepared for the Council. In the message the Pope identified "a whole series of world problems to be debated by the Council, but which in fact were not dealt with in the nearly seventy schemata" that had been drafted in preparation for Vatican II. ^[3]

In the Pope's own words: "The world has its problems, for which it anxiously seeks a solution." "These problems of very acute gravity have always had their place in the heart of the Church." He was not content to identify the obvious spheres of problems, which would later be taken up by the Council. In the spirit of a good shepherd, which would become the spirit of the Council, Pope John identified the root issue: "The terms of the conflict, good and evil, remain and will last into the future, because the human will will always have freedom to express itself and the possibility to go astray."^[4]

In one way or another, all of the signs of the times are manifestations of this interior condition of man. The Church calls this sin, and she knows that the only answer to the problem of sin is redemption in Christ. Thus, Pope John stated in the same radio broadcast:

But from Christ and His Church will come the final and eternal victory in each soul of the elect of every people.... from all the points of the earth, the Church of Jesus responds: *Deo gratias, Deo gratias*, as if to say: "Yes: *lumen Christi: lumen Ecclesiae: lumen gentium.*"

Here, in its essence, is the true spirit of Vatican II.^[5] It is the conviction of faith that there is one and only one Light that can dispel the darkness of sin and thus overcome sin's consequences. The Church's vocation is to reflect this light so that it can be seen by the nations of men. The way that she accomplishes this, at a time when her contemporaries and even many among her own members are unable to perceive it, is by intensifying its brightness. This is achieved by the Church engaging in a profound renewal of herself. Through a conversion intended to bring about an even greater and more conspicuous conformity to Christ, the world would have placed before it an alternative vision of human fulfillment and happiness that constitutes the answer to its problems, perplexities, and anxieties. The mechanism of this renewal, the method by which the Church would increase its participation in the life of Christ, is the key to understand that the underlying issue at stake at Vatican II was that of the efficacy of God's love.

What Difference Does Believing Make?

Before turning to consider this renewal, it should be pointed out that Pope John was not alone in viewing the Council as the Church's response to the problems and crisis of humanity. We can thank George Weigel for summarizing the contribution of a young Polish bishop in his response to the worldwide survey of bishops, directed by Pope John in 1959, as preparation for the Council.^[6] For Bishop Wojtyla, the challenge the Church faced in the Council was "to present the sacred in such manner as seems entirely fitting to the men of today." In other words, the Church needs to show that, how, and why Christian doctrine is relevant to man's questions, to his search for fullness of meaning, and to his aspirations for a better world more worthy of human dignity. This is what would constitute the pastoral character of Vatican II.^[7] Weigel writes:

The crucial issue of the times, he suggested, was the human person... The world wanted to hear what the Church had to say about the human person and the human condition, particularly in light of other proposals – "scientific, positivist, dialectical" – that imagined themselves humanistic and presented themselves as roads to liberation. At the end of 2,000 years of Christian history, the world had a question to put to the Church: What was Christian humanism and how was it different from the sundry other humanisms on offer in late modernity? What was the Church's answer to modernity's widespread "despair [about] any and all human existence"?

The crisis of humanism at the midpoint of a century that prided itself on its humanism should be the organizing framework for the Council's deliberations, Bishop Wojtyla proposed. The Church did not exist for itself. The Church existed for the salvation of a world in which the promise of the world's humanization through material means had led, time and again, to dehumanization and degradation.

What was singular and, to use an abused term in its proper sense, prophetic about Wojtyła's proposal was its insistence that the question of a humanism adequate to the aspirations of the men and women of the age had to be the epicenter of the Council's concerns. There would be much talk before, during, and after the Council about "reading the signs of the times." Here was a thirty-nine-year-old bishop who, having done precisely that, had put his finger on the deepest wound of his century so that it could be healed by a more compelling proclamation of the Gospel. [8]

The Council was pastoral in the way that it set forth doctrine. It was not content simply to answer the question, "What does the Church believe?" Rather, presupposing and building on the answer to this question, it wanted to answer another question: "What difference does believing make?" The challenge the Council took up was to present doctrine in such a way that people could perceive, with the help of God's grace, of course, that revealed truth possesses the power to give life a new direction. Neglecting what the Church has to say because it is was considered irrelevant, modern man was turning to any number of alternatives, which could not satisfy his deepest desires. The Gospel that the Church offers is the truth that sets man free from incomplete, erroneous, and consequently degrading visions of human fulfillment that are in the end only pseudo-humanisms. At Vatican II the Church set forth her doctrine in relation to man's God-given dynamism to seek the full meaning of his life. This is what I call the apologetics of meaning.

The Apologetic of Meaning

This particular apologetics corresponds to an element of Pope John's vision for the Council. In his opening address he stated that the Council would not publish condemnations as previous councils did. It is not that the condemnation of errors is not a legitimate and necessary exercise of apostolic teaching authority. Pope John was aware of this magisterium of condemnation. He was convinced that the Church had defended her patrimony of apostolic doctrine. "The Church has always opposed these errors, and often condemned them with the utmost severity." Presupposing the clarification of truth, he judged that "present needs are best served by explaining more fully the purport of her doctrines, rather than by publishing condemnations."

This emphasis on explanation is best understood in light of the distinction between error and the one in error. Adapting the well-known distinction between sin and sinner, one can say that an element of the true spirit of Vatican II is to hate the error while loving those in error. A passage from the encyclical, *Pacem in terris* (April, 1963), can serve as a commentary.

It is always perfectly justifiable to distinguish between error as such and the person who falls into

error—even in the case of men who err regarding the truth or are led astray as a result of their inadequate knowledge, in matters either of religion or of the highest ethical standards. A man who has fallen into error does not cease to be a man. He never forfeits his personal dignity; and that is something that must always be taken into account. Besides, there exists in man's very nature an undying capacity to break through the barriers of error and seek the road to truth. God, in His great providence, is ever present with His aid.[9]

In his closing address, Pope Paul VI picked up on this theme of his predecessor's opening address. He acknowledged that while the Council did indeed condemn a number of errors, these were not so much errors against revealed truth but errors opposed to the truth about the human person and human dignity. For example, the Council condemned racism, genocide, slavery, and the curtailment of religious liberty. In fidelity to Pope John's intention, the Council was not content to stop there. "Errors were condemned, indeed, because charity demanded this no less than did truth, but for the persons themselves there was only warning, respect and love."

It is lamentable that after the Council many people perceived this respect for persons and the desire to persuade by explaining as a sign of weakness and even a readiness to compromise on the truth. Certainly, the rotten fruit of compromise—that is, of accommodating the truth rather than merely the manner in which the truth is expressed—that accompanied unenlightened attempts to engage in dialogue gave good reason for well-informed people to be leery. Yet, the Holy Spirit exhorts the Church, through St. Peter: "Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence" (1 Pet 3:15). Vatican II may be thought of as the response of the Church of the mid-twentieth century to this divine mandate.

As the sports-wise say, the best defense is a good offense. The apologetics of meaning is the most effective offense and the most powerful apologia for the faith. The reason for this is that what God has revealed in Christ constitutes an appeal to free will, which is moved by the truth, beauty, and goodness of Christ's life and of the doctrine that puts that life into words. He is the perfect man (see *Gaudium et spes*, 22, 38, 45), and those who seek Him do so precisely because they seek to be fully human: "Whoever follows after Christ, the perfect man, becomes himself more of a man" (*Gaudium et spes*, 41). The light of the Perfect Man in communion with God is reflected in the saints, who by grace participate in Christ's life.

The Council defied the secularism of the age, which was not content merely to promote a humanism without reference to God so that men lived as if God did not exist, but became aggressively anti-Christian and unleashed new waves of persecution. Secularism was the chief error of the age that the Council condemned, not just in isolated assertions, but in the totality of its message. Taking the offensive, it corrected the error of secularism by insisting that any philosophy or promotion of human dignity that

neglects man's natural religious dynamisms offers only an illusory hope for a better future. Man is made for communion with the holy God, and the holiness of the saints puts the full truth about human dignity on display. For, "by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society" (*Lumen gentium*, 40).

The Witness of the Saints

Divine revelation occurs through the interaction of actions and words that mutually complement and interpret one another (see *Dei Verbum*, 2). It stands to reason, then, that its reflected light in the Church should be perceptible through the lives of saints and the words that signify the doctrinal truths by which the saints live. The numerous blessed and saints canonized by Pope John Paul II may be thought of as the divine stamp of approval on the magisterium of Vatican II. The same Holy Spirit Who guided the Council's work and to Whom its final teaching "seemed good" (Acts 15:28) raises up saints who show us precisely what doctrine lived looks like, setting the good of a fully human life before all those who seek precisely such a meaningful existence. "The very testimony of their Christian life and good works done in a supernatural spirit have the power to draw men to belief and to God; for the Lord says, 'Even so let your light shine before men in order that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven' (Matt 5:16)" (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, 6).

The saints' integrity of life and heroic virtue demonstrate that God's love is efficacious. They are not self-made men and women. In humility they confess their sins and profess the saving grace of God. They know that they are what they are by God's mercy, making their own the words of St. Paul: "by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain" (1 Cor 15:10). At Vatican II the Church not only presented Christ as the Perfect Man and His Mother and the saints as models of a fully human life. It also taught that the Church is the place where the grace to enter into this fullness of meaning is available. Thus, through the Church, Christ "opens up to man at the same time the meaning of his own existence, that is, the innermost truth about himself." This corresponds to what man needs, since "man will always yearn to know, at least in an obscure way, what is the meaning of his life, of his activity, of his death" (*Gaudium et spes*, 41). By living the new life of Baptism, Christians bear witness to "the real meaning of human life" (*Ad gentes*, 11) because they participate in the fullness of the meaning of life revealed in the Perfect Man.

The True Spirit of Catholicism

Throughout his pontificate, Pope John Paul II steadfastly kept his commitment to implement the Council by developing this apologetics of meaning. His two great meditations on the encounter between Jesus and the rich young man, *Dilecti amici* and the first part of *Veritatis splendor*, set forth the essentials of the

dynamic dialogue between man and God occasioned by man's search for meaning. Most recently, the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization began its Message to the People of God by proclaiming that the Church continues Christ's mission by accompanying mankind in its search for meaning.

Let us draw light from a Gospel passage: Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman (cf. *John* 4:5-42). There is no man or woman who, in one's life, would not find oneself like the woman of Samaria beside a well with an empty bucket, with the hope of finding the fulfillment of the heart's most profound desire, that which alone could give full meaning to existence. Today, many wells offer themselves to quench humanity's thirst, but we must discern in order to avoid polluted waters. We must orient the search well, so as not to fall prey to disappointment, which can be disastrous.

Like Jesus at the well of Sychar, the Church also feels obliged to sit beside today's men and women. She wants to render the Lord present in their lives so that they could encounter him because he alone is the water that gives true and eternal life. Only Jesus can read the depths of our heart and reveal the truth about ourselves: "*He told me everything I have done*", the woman confesses to her fellow citizens. This word of proclamation is united to the question that opens up to faith: "*Could he possibly be the Messiah?*" It shows that whoever receives new life from encountering Jesus cannot but proclaim truth and hope to others. The sinner who was converted becomes a messenger of salvation and leads the whole city to Jesus. The people pass from welcoming her testimony to personally experiencing the encounter: "*We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world*".

At the outset of the Year of Faith and fifty years after the Council began, a text like this demonstrates the Church's commitment fully to appropriate the true spirit of Vatican II. This spirit is nothing other than the spirit of Catholicism itself, of the Church guided by the Holy Spirit, discovering anew its divinely assured attribute of catholicity and committing herself to accept all of the responsibilities that come with it. If catholicity received an especial attention at Vatican II, an attentive reading of the conciliar texts confirms that this mark of catholicity was never disjoined from the complementary marks of unity, holiness, and apostolicity, without which it cannot be the catholicity willed by Christ; a reinvigoration of the Church's missionary mandate cannot fail to entail a deepening of every aspect of her mystery. The renewal of Vatican II was and remains comprehensive. Its fruit of holiness and unity in the truth of apostolic teaching is verified by a New Evangelization that takes the form of a ministry of accompaniment as the Church makes Christ present to all men and women in their search for life-giving, that is, meaning-giving water.

Love, Joy, and Renewal

With this we arrive at the decisive point at which to grasp how the pastoral and missionary spirit of Vatican II is linked to the question of the efficacy of God's love. The fullness of life in Christ, the joy of living in the certainty of being loved (see CCC, 2778), and most especially the capacity to love that is the gift of Christ to His disciples simultaneously stir the hopes of mankind regarding their aspirations and point to the grace of God as its cause. As the Council taught, the Church is both a sign and an instrument of life in Christ (see *Lumen gentium*, 1).

Pope Benedict has made Christian joy a central theme of his pontificate and of the Year of Faith in particular. In this he shows the continuity of his pontificate with that of his predecessor, John Paul II, and through him with Paul VI and Vatican II. Joy is the language of human happiness. A fruit of the Holy Spirit (see Gal 5:22), it accompanies the faith that receives the Good News of God's love fully revealed in Jesus Christ. As Cardinal Ratzinger once said, joy is a proper name of the Holy Spirit. It points to the awareness among those of mature faith that they have received the Gift of gifts, that they have encountered Christ in their search for meaning and now, through Him and by the gift of the Holy Spirit, are in possession of that meaning. By God's mercy they have come into possession of the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in a field. Their song of joy is that of the Blessed Virgin: "He who is mighty has done great things for me" (Lk 1:49). Joy bears witness to the fact that God's love is performative and transformative, that the Paschal Mystery has changed the course of history by changing the hearts of men who are the agents that give history its direction.

This explains why the Council Fathers focused their attention on the Church's renewal of herself. The most effective way to make the message about a fully human life in Christ credible is to demonstrate that by the grace of God it is attainable. This will be proof of the efficacy of God's love. Thus, prior to any of its officially promulgated documents, in its Message to Humanity (Oct 20, 1962), the Council Fathers wrote: "we wish to inquire how we ought to renew ourselves, so that we may be found increasingly faithful to the gospel of Christ." Paul VI put it this way: "Our intense desire is to see the Church become what Christ intended it to be: one, holy, and entirely dedicated to the pursuit of that perfection to which Christ called it and for which He qualified it" (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 41).

Pope John Paul II would carry this theme forward by saying that in order for the Church to be an evangelizing community she must first be an evangelized community. Before the Church can play a role in leading others to conversion the faithful must be converted. This humble recognition of the need for the Church to renew itself was also repeated at the recent Synod on the New Evangelization:

We, however, should never think that the new evangelization does not concern us personally. In these days voices among the Bishops were raised to recall that the Church must first of all heed

the Word before she could evangelize the world. The invitation to evangelize becomes a call to conversion.

Pope Paul outlined the renewal of Vatican II in his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*. It is popularly known as *Paths of the Church* because in a general audience just days before it was released the Pope himself said that it could be called ‘Paths of the Church’ because it sets forth the three paths the Church must follow in order to renew herself. The first path “concerns the *consciousness* of itself that the Church must have and nourish. The second is moral. It concerns the ascetic, practical, canonical *renewal*, which the Church needs in order to conform to the consciousness just mentioned, in order to be pure, holy, strong, and authentic. The third path is apostolic. And We have designated it with a term in vogue today: *dialogue*. This path concerns the manner, art, and style that the Church must instill in her ministerial activities in the dissonant, changing, complex concert of the contemporary world.”

More succinctly, in the encyclical itself, Pope Paul summarized its movement: “She [the Church] must learn to know herself better [consciousness], if she wishes to live her own proper vocation [renewal] and to offer to the world her message of brotherhood and of salvation [dialogue] (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 25).

The Call to Conversion

The main desire of the Council was to reinvigorate the Church’s mission of promoting a fully human life in Christ. Pope Paul and the Council Fathers realized that this mission could only be the fruit of holiness and of a fervent, paschal charity. “To this internal drive of charity which seeks expression in the external gift of charity, We will apply the word ‘dialogue’” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 64). Greater conformity to Christ through conversion brings about a more intense love for God and for all those whom God loves. Such a perfect love is the condition for continuing the mission of Christ. Such charity is the soul of the apostolate (see *Lumen gentium*, 33 and *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 3). The Council Fathers were not naïve about the nature of this charity. The Eucharist is the source of its vitality, and this means that it is necessary paschal (see *Lumen gentium*, 42). Only this kind of self-giving love, only a charity that loves “to the end” (Jn 13:1) is strong enough to make the sacrifices required to love those who are in the most need of being loved, even the Church’s persecutors.

The renewal of conversion presupposes doctrine, which gives conversion its objective orientation. The whole purpose of conversion is to root out all that does not conform to doctrine. Conversion is the Church’s cooperation with the grace of God in building a civilization of love, one soul at a time. To convert is to turn away from all that is opposed to the truth that gives content to God’s love in order to receive that love and to be transformed into God’s likeness by participating more fully in the life of the Perfect Man.

The fruit of this renewal is mission and service. It is participation in the love, mission, and service of the Perfect Man. This is the New Evangelization. At the outset of the Council, the Message to Humanity stated that “faith, hope, and the love of Christ impel us to serve our brothers, thereby patterning ourselves after the example of the Divine Teacher, who ‘came not to be served but to serve’ (Matt 20:28). Hence, the Church too was not born to dominate but to serve. He laid down His life for us, and we too ought to lay down our lives for our brothers (cf. 1 Jn 3:16).”

As a bookend to this, at the end of the Council Pope Paul summed up the true spirit of Vatican II in these words:

The old story of the Samaritan has been the model of the spirituality of the council. A feeling of boundless sympathy has permeated the whole of it. The attention of our council has been absorbed by the discovery of human needs (and these needs grow in proportion to the greatness which the son of the earth claims for himself).... all this rich teaching is channeled in one direction, the service of mankind, of every condition, in every weakness and need. The Church has, so to say, declared herself the servant of humanity, at the very time when her teaching role and her pastoral government have, by reason of the council’s solemnity, assumed greater splendor and vigor: the idea of service has been central.[\[10\]](#)

Because the mission to serve and the dialogue of the New Evangelization depend upon the renewal of conversion and this depends on doctrinal awareness, nothing could more fundamentally thwart the Council’s aspiration for a revitalized mission (a New Evangelization) than confusion about doctrine.

Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI repeatedly insisted on fidelity to the apostolic tradition as the foundation of the conciliar renewal. Yet, following the Council, and laying claim to its spirit, theological investigation profoundly unsettled the firm convictions of the faithful. Doubts about the consciousness Jesus had of His divine personhood, mission, and founding of the Church, about universally binding moral precepts, mortal sin, and sexual morality, about the unicity of Christ and the Church, about the Eucharist, and more, colluded to undermine the very foundation of conversion. How can the Church’s members become more perfectly what they are if they lack a clear vision of God’s will? And how likely is it that they will embrace the baptismal vocation to die with Christ to sin if they lack a solid conviction regarding revealed truth?

A Deeper Understanding of Doctrine

In this Year of Faith on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Vatican II, one of the most pressing needs in the Church is to enter more fully into the outline of the conciliar renewal set forth by Paul VI in

Ecclesiam Suam. Pope John Paul II said it himself: “In our time, as we look towards the third millennium, it [*Ecclesiam Suam*] should be re-read with greater attention and deeper understanding in order to grasp its full prophetic value and to implement the Council’s directives in the best way” (Angelus, Aug 2, 1998). Particularly significant is the fact that the first path or dimension of renewal is doctrinal awareness. This is what Pope John called doctrinal penetration. In his well-known address of December 22, 2005, Pope Benedict echoed this when he said the Council’s pastoral *aggiornamento* with respect to doctrine is not a matter of updating for its own sake. Rather, it is the fruit of a deeper understanding of doctrine resulting from a greater depth of living it, that is, of conforming to it through conversion.

It is clear that this commitment to expressing a specific truth in a new way demands new thinking on this truth and a new and vital relationship with it; it is also clear that new words can only develop if they come from an informed understanding of the truth expressed, and on the other hand, that a reflection on faith also requires that this faith be lived. In this regard, the program that Pope John XXIII proposed was extremely demanding.

Since Vatican II, the three dimensions of renewal of *Ecclesiam Suam* have been institutionalized in the form of three dimensions of formation for seminarians, deacons, religious, catechists, and laity. These are almost invariably named doctrinal (or theological formation), spiritual formation, and pastoral formation. When doctrine does not provide the principles for spiritual and pastoral formation, its relevance is undermined and a genuine crisis ensues. When spiritual formation sidesteps doctrine and emphasized techniques and methods of prayer, often imported from outside the Catholic tradition, it thereby implies that doctrine is irrelevant to the spiritual life. In reality, the spiritual life and the life of prayer and conversion are nothing other than doctrine internalized, appropriated, and fully assimilate and embedded in one’s consciousness so that one’s very identity is inseparable from that doctrine.

Catholic spirituality, properly understood and lived, is an ongoing liberation from sin into love by the power of God’s Word. When formation for ministry, apostolate, mission, and service places the accent on organization, programs, and models crafted by human inventiveness, then doctrine appears extraneous and again irrelevant.

At the Second Vatican Council, the Church reiterated her conviction that the Eucharist is the source and summit of Christian life and spirituality, and the vital source of renewal and of mission. Yet, when spiritual formation and pastoral formation are not sufficiently grounded in doctrine, such a Eucharist-centered renewal cannot take effect. The crisis of Eucharistic faith and devotion in the Church has been the most distressing indicator the post-conciliar deviations from the doctrine-based renewal envisioned by Pope John and elaborated by Pope Paul. The latter was not unaware of the grave aberrations that would result if mission (dialogue, service, New Evangelization) and spiritual renewal through conversion were

disjoined from doctrinal awareness. He wrote that “an immoderate desire” for what might be described as quick results from the mission of dialogue could only be a desire “to make peace and sink differences at all costs (irenism and syncretism).”

He does not say it, but it is clear that he realized that we have no right to expect fruit without suffering, without embracing the spirituality of the grain of wheat that must fall and die in order to bear fruit. In other words, the path is a paschal one. Any attempt to promote the Church’s mission without this “is ultimately nothing more than skepticism about the power and content of the Word of God which we desire to preach. The effective apostle is the man who is completely faithful to Christ’s teaching. He alone can remain unaffected by the errors of the world around him, the man who lives his Christian life to the full” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 88).

Has not such a skepticism about the power of doctrinal truth to renew the Church and the face of the earth been a lamentable sign of the times in so much of the pseudo-renewal that has not been faithful to the spirit and the letter of Vatican II? If people are not thoroughly convinced in the power of truth to save and to reshape the lives of men for their authentic fulfillment and happiness in Christ, then it stands to reason that will turn elsewhere, that they will place their hopes for a new springtime for the Church in something other than doctrine.

What is the remedy for pseudo-renewals that neglect doctrine as the foundation? Conversion! Personal conversion, the personal experience of the liberating power of divinely revealed truth and the saving efficacy of the grace of Christ that comes to us through the sacraments, the charisms, and the communion of saints – this is the source of the conviction that this truth and grace are the hope for humanity. Conversion brings the wisdom to know that if methods, techniques, and programs are have a place and to some extent are simply necessary, truth and grace are what is essential. Conversion assures that the order of means will not take precedence over the end. Through the deep conversion of being renewed by the truth, love, and grace of Christ people know by experience how to love others. Their mission is simple: to bring the light of Christ to those who live in darkness. They are able to love as they have been loved.

This conversion, then, is the heart of the renewal of Vatican II, and the key the New Evangelization that is its main goal. Conversion is the greatest witness to the efficacy of divine love. Through conversion the doctrine of God’s merciful love becomes more than a truth to be known. It becomes the key to life’s meaning. Those who are transformed by God’s love profess that love because God has revealed it and because by revealing it He has exercised it in their behalf. To profess faith in Christ means not only to say, “I believe what God has made known about His love.” It also means that one can say: “I have been the beneficiary of that love. I have been loved.” To paraphrase a verse of St. Paul: The Spirit himself bears

witness to God's love in our hearts so that our own spirit bears witness with Him that we have been loved by God (see Rom 8:16).

History, Hope, and Holiness

In one of the most important studies of the apologetic pastoral theology of Vatican II, René Latourelle wrote: "If Christianity cannot show in practice this change in the human condition, it confesses its failure."^[11] He could have put it this way: If those who are baptized live "like the other nations" (1 Sam 8:5, 20), if the values that drive their decisions are different than those of the surrounding culture, if there is no joy and if genuine Eucharistic spirituality is absent, then what difference does Christian faith make? By implication, this raises the question about God and His love: Does God make any difference? Does His love have any effect?

To what can the Church point in order to make the argument that God is directing history, that His love is impactful? The Second Vatican Council took up this question, which derives from the preceding questions. Cardinal Ratzinger once put it this way: "This is precisely what the Second Vatican Council had intended: to endow Christianity once more with the power to shape history."^[12] Christianity shapes history through the reshaping of the freedom of the agent of history, man. It shapes history by proclaiming the Good News about God's love, by offering the examples of the saints, and by making available the transforming grace of God's love in the sacraments. More than anything else, it is holiness and the ongoing conversion into holiness that bears witness to the efficacy of God's love and gives hope to humanity that its genuine aspirations for a fully meaningful life are not an illusion but can be fulfilled. This is why both Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II summarized the renewal of Vatican II in the call to holiness:

This strong invitation to holiness could be regarded as the most characteristic element in the whole Magisterium of the Council, and so to say, its ultimate purpose.^[13]

The Second Vatican Council has significantly spoken on the universal call to holiness. It is possible to say that this call to holiness is precisely the basic charge entrusted to all the sons and daughters of the Church by a Council which intended to bring a renewal of Christian life based on the Gospel (*Chrisfideles laici*, 16).

ENDNOTES:

^[1] "The Council understood itself as a great examination of conscience by the Church;^[1] it wanted ultimately to be an act of penance, of conversion" (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic*

Theology. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 371-373). Thinking of the Council as an examination of conscience originates, as far as I know, with the Lenten Pastoral Letter of Cardinal Montini (later to be Paul VI) of February 22, 1962.

[2] *The Church and Mankind*. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1967, 3.

[3] Ibid., 4.

[4] In his first encyclical, Pope John Paul II would echo this: “It was precisely this man in all the truth of his life, in his conscience, in his continual inclination to sin and at the same time in his continual aspiration to truth, the good, the beautiful, justice and love that the Second Vatican Council had before its eyes when, in outlining his situation in the modern world, it always passed from the external elements of this situation to the truth within humanity” (*Redemptor hominis*, 14). John Paul continues by quoting from *Gaudium et spes*, 10: “In man himself many elements wrestle with one another. Thus, on the one hand, as a creature he experiences his limitations in a multitude of ways. On the other, he feels himself to be boundless in his desires and summoned to a higher life. Pulled by manifold attractions, he is constantly forced to choose among them and to renounce some. Indeed, as a weak and sinful being, he often does what he would not, and fails to do what he would. Hence he suffers from internal divisions, and from these flow so many and such great discords in society.

[5] According to Pope John’s secretary, this radio address “stands as perhaps the most complete indication of John’s thinking on the direction the Council should take” (Capovilla, Loris, “Reflections on the Twentieth Anniversary,” in *Vatican II Revisited by Those Who Were There*. Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1986, 119).

[6] See *Witness to Hope. The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Cliff Street Books, HarperCollins, 1999), 158-160.

[7] See the well-known passage of the opening address to the Council of Pope John XXIII.

[8] George Weigel, *Witness to Hope. The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Cliff Street Books, HarperCollins, 1999), 158-160.

[9] John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*, 158.

[10] Pope Paul VI, Closing Speech of December 7, 1965. Are the four mentions of the Good Samaritan by Pope Benedict in his first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, a mere coincidence? Or, are they a deliberate way for him to link his pontificate with Vatican II as understood by Paul VI?

[11] *Christ and the Church, Signs of Salvation*, 59.

[12] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Introduction to Christianity, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” in *Communio* 31, n. 3, (2004), 482.

[13] *Sanctitatis clarior*, Motu proprio of March 19, 1969; AAS 61(1969), 149.