

After the Council: Living Vatican II

July 8, 2004

By George Sim Johnston

In that moral masterpiece, *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II begins with the Gospel episode of the rich young man before Christ, and it's not a bad place to start a discussion of the Catholic Church since Vatican II. It is easy to think of this encounter as a parable, but it really happened and that well-to-do young man is somewhere right now. In the Gospel story, he's a devout Israelite who, as John Paul puts it, has grown up "in the shadow of the Law." He has faithfully followed its precepts. But something is missing, and he asks Christ what it might be. Christ's answer—"Come, follow me"—is completely unexpected. It goes well beyond the young man's idea of "religion," and so he walks away sad and perplexed.

The rich young man is not unlike a pre-Vatican II Catholic in the affluent West. He has spent his life (mostly) following the rules and understands "eternal life" as an extrinsic reward for having done so. And yet despite the double consolation of economic security and religious correctness, it occurs to him that something more is needed. Christ tells him to keep the commandments. The young man replies, "I have kept all these. What do I still lack?" At this point, like a good pre-Vatican II Catholic, he's probably expecting to be told to perform extra devotion: Go and recite the seven penitential Psalms. Or an extra discipline: Don't eat meat on Fridays.

Instead, Christ offers him precisely the challenge that Vatican II made to the Catholic world. It is a challenge both personal and deeply supernatural. The council was a call to Catholics to break from their harness of legalism and externalism. To stop compartmentalizing their religion and risk a transformation in grace. To pass from a merely objective faith—something you have—to one fully lived. It suggested that the more fruitful line of questioning is not, What is prohibited? or, What is required? but rather, What sort of person am I to be? And it proposed the Person of Christ as the answer. Only after absorbing this truth can we fully comprehend why it is we follow His commandments, which otherwise can be a joyless burden.

The Second Vatican Council was a call to full spiritual maturity. It was time to take off the training wheels—to stop living "in the shadow of the Law"—and take our vocations as Christians seriously. The pre-Vatican II Church "worked" marvelously well, which is why there are those who are nostalgic, but it wasn't spiritually creative. The council offered the difference between a minimalist, rules-oriented Catholicism and full discipleship, especially for the laity. In its focus on the human person, rather than on dogmatic truths about the divine order, it reminded us that we're obliged to become the person God wants us to be and that this isn't a limitation of our freedom—as the rich young man supposes—but its guarantee.

Once we had achieved that freedom through the call to holiness, we could go out and change the world. This has been the program of John Paul's pontificate. But the pope has faced serious obstacles within the Church in implementing the council. The problem has been summed up by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger: "What devastated the Church in the decade after the Council was not the Council but the refusal to accept it." In fact, it's striking how ill-equipped the Church—clergy and laity included—was to receive the teachings of the council (and, for that matter, *Humanae Vitae* a few years later). The philosophical richness and originality of the documents were missed entirely. Instead of spiritual renewal and a new evangelization, what we got was a fight between "conservatives" and "liberals," both stuck in previous categories of Church thinking.

It is safe to say that most of the bishops who attended the council had little idea how to implement it. That generation of American bishops had many strengths, but an appreciation of Pope John XXIII's *aggiornamento*, and the theological vision behind it, was not among them. They returned to business as usual, and the council's teachings became a dead letter. In one chancery (I am told) a few months after the council ended, the archbishop was sitting with his retinue, and a monsignor spoke up: "Shouldn't we do something about the council?" To which the archbishop shot back, "You do something about the council."

It was this failure of the Church's leaders to explain the council that allowed it to be so easily hijacked by progressives. Unfortunately, the story doesn't end there. Powerful mid-century prelates like Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York and James Cardinal McIntyre of Los Angeles, presiding as they did over an American Church that was a great "success story," didn't appreciate a deeper problem that had been working through the Church for decades and was about to turn it upside down.

That problem was described by the great French Thomist Jacques Maritain who, in *The Peasant of the Garonne* (1966), asked why so many priests and religious took such a bad turn even before the council ended. The explanation, according to Maritain, was a malaise that had been building for half a century. In the preconciliar Church there had been a kind of "practical Manichaeism," which involved "purely moralistic prohibitions, injunctions to flight, habits of fear, disciplines of denial in which love had no part, where science was held the enemy of religion...the almost exclusive recourse to disciplinary measures, the spiritual impoverishment of the laity, who thought the call to the perfection of charity is the exclusive concern of monks.... [A]ll this was going to build up, in the unconscious of a great many Christians, clerics and laymen, an enormous weight of frustration, disillusionment, repressed doubts, resentment, bitterness, healthy desires sacrificed...."

"Then," Maritain continues, "comes the *aggiornamento*. Why be astonished that at the very announcement of a Council...the enormous unconscious weight which I

have just mentioned bursts into the open in a kind of explosion that does no honor to human intelligence?" Romano Guardini similarly noticed in German theology professors decades before the council a Catholicism that was merely liberalism kept in check by a reluctant obedience to dogma. In the very heart of many religious orders and theology faculties, the Faith was experienced as a fetter, an imposed burden, a set of rules. Do you remember the "bad" nun in the movie *The Song of Bernadette*? It would have been impossible to remain in this state, council or no council. A crisis was inevitable, and perhaps not entirely regrettable. If the journals of the late Alexander Schmemmann, a gifted Russian Orthodox priest and theologian, are any guide, one problem with modern Eastern Orthodoxy has been the lack of a crisis, resulting in an increasingly ossified, ahistorical religiosity that has no idea how to engage the modern world.

Traditionalist Catholics who blame all the Church's recent problems on Vatican II should ponder a few questions: If the Church was in such good shape before the council, why did things fall apart so rapidly in the 1960s? How do you account for the fact that the rebellion was the work of bishops, theologians, and priests who came out of the Tridentine system? Had all those priests and nuns who suddenly wanted to be laicized received adequate formation under the old system? Why was there so much dissatisfaction? It won't do simply to rattle off statistics about the decline of the Church since the council. There's no question that there were good and holy Catholics in the old days—even some saints—and that since the council we have lost much that is good. But there were also problems waiting to erupt. Might not the Magisterium have been correct in addressing them in the council's documents?

Called by the council to full spiritual adulthood, a significant number of priests and religious instead broke out in adolescent rebellion, a discharge of decades of narrow, rules-based formation and institutional frustration. It seemed that the preconciliar Church had produced legions of clerics who were incapable of intelligently and prayerfully studying the council's documents. And their bishops certainly weren't going to insist. Imagine Father Burner in J. F. Powers's devastating short story "The Prince of Darkness" (1947) picking up *Gaudium et Spes*; he would quickly fix himself a drink and turn on the television.

The late philosopher David Stove, an acute diagnostician of the modern age, writes about how what passes for much of modern philosophy is no more than an acting out of a horror of all things Victorian. This syndrome has its counterpart in the modern Catholic Church. Among Catholics of a certain age, there is a dread of anything smacking of preconciliar Catholicism. Latin, Gregorian chant, Renaissance polyphony, incense, gothic and baroque architecture, dogmatic definitions—all evoke a reaction well-described by Stove: "A sensation of darkness, stillness, enclosure, and, above all, of weight or pressure...." And the impulse of these progressive

Catholics is to do exactly what their counterparts have done in the secular culture: Knock down everything they find left standing from the old days.

As a result, the reception of the council by “liberals” amounted to no more than the commandeering of a few phrases—such as “people of God” and “signs of the times”—out of context. It was time to break the fetters. A loud “Non serviam!” erupted within the Church, along with a surrender to the secular world, which itself was going through a massive identity crisis. These dissidents conjured away the council’s demand for inner reform and apostolic zeal, substituting in its place a generic Christianity that is indistinguishable from bourgeois liberalism’s understanding of the common decencies.

As for the Catholic laity: Do not underestimate the role of rising affluence in the troubles since the council. The post-conciliar mischief was initiated by disaffected clergy, but during these years, an increasingly wealthy and assimilated laity was perfectly happy to follow the path of least resistance marked by dissident theologians. In 1937, the Protestant thinker H. Richard Niebuhr drew attention to a soft-core spirituality among Americans: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” Was it likely that Catholics would be immune once they emerged from the ethnic ghetto, moved to the suburbs, and joined the mainstream? The Book of Revelation’s warnings to the Christians at Laodicea—who “say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing...’”—no doubt find application in every age but have particular relevance for the contemporary Catholic who has made his comfort zone the ninth Beatitude.

It is easy to look at the Church today and be pessimistic. There’s an easygoing spirituality among the laity, disaffection and heterodoxy among the clergy, an episcopate that veers between laxity and damage control, and, of course, the scandals. Looked at in a certain way, post-Vatican II Catholicism would all seem a downward spiral, a crisis from which there’s no obvious exit. But any such pessimism is misplaced. First, as someone once said, the Church isn’t a museum of saints but a hospital for sinners. This includes all of us. Human failure will always be generously spread among the faithful. Christ warned about this explicitly. It isn’t clear that the Church today is any worse off than it was in 500 or 1500. In fact, there’s probably now a higher proportion of good bishops, dedicated priests, and devout laity.

But history has even more important lessons. Christopher Dawson once identified six great periods of Church history, and each one begins with a crisis. Nearly all of the 21 ecumenical councils have upset the Church’s equilibrium. The aftermaths of Nicea and Chalcedon shook the Church to its foundations in a way that makes recent decades look like a tea party. That most of the Church didn’t immediately “get” the teachings of Vatican II also has ample precedent. The same happened after the

Council of Trent, whose decrees were ignored in France for almost a century. St. Augustine reminds us that the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church is slow, often imperceptible, but without interruption.

And just as the Council of Trent was implemented—in fact, rescued—by a few great popes, especially St. Pius V, we now have in the pontificate of John Paul II the council's definitive interpretation. One reason for Wojtyła's election in 1978 was the conclave's awareness of his vigorous promotion of the council's decrees in the Archdiocese of Kraków. Even before the council ended, Bishop Wojtyła told his flock, "I want to awaken the Archdiocese of Kraków to the true meaning of the Council, so that we may bring it into our lives." Such words were not heard on this side of the Atlantic. Catholic dissenters who complain that this pope has "betrayed" the council forget that John Paul was an enthusiastic participant in all four sessions, strongly aligning with the "progressives" against the ecclesial bureaucrats who wanted simply to reiterate doctrine in the accepted neo-scholastic format. And he hasn't changed at all.

The most extraordinary—and providential—fact of recent Church history is the alignment of Karol Wojtyła and Vatican II. From the very beginning, when he was a philology student in the late 1930s, Wojtyła had been pursuing a philosophical project that dovetailed remarkably with the concerns of the council. He was ready for Vatican II in a way that few other bishops were: He put a strong mark on the council's three most important documents—*Lumen Gentium*, *Dignitatis Humanae*, and *Gaudium et Spes*. And as pope he has given us a gloss on the council, starting with those astonishing 130 Wednesday audiences on the "theology of the body," whose depth and originality exceed anything that has come out of the papacy since Leo XIII, or perhaps even St. Gregory the Great.

This pope has taken the documents of Vatican II for what they are: marching orders for the new millennium. And he has expanded their richness and application. Whoever the next pope may be, he won't have to do much writing. The Church's middle management has been slow to absorb John Paul's writings—in many chanceries and seminaries they remain, in Mary Ann Glendon's phrase, "unopened letters"—but this won't be determinative. They have touched enough intelligent Catholics, especially among the laity, to change the Church in the long run. This is how the Holy Spirit works. Two thousand years have taught us the Church's remarkable recuperative powers. And whether it was the sixth or the 16th century, spiritual renewal has always been a matter of grassroots movements inspired by and working with the papacy. The difference now is that whereas for Gregory the Great and Pius V the agents of evangelization were monks or Jesuits, for John Paul II it will be the laity.

The arsenal for this renewal will be the documents of Vatican II and the writings of this pope, which form a perfect continuum. Both are a call to personal conversion—to a maturity in self-giving—that goes far beyond simply obeying laws and commandments. The question for each orthodox Catholic is whether to take up the Magisterium’s challenge or be content with the “fundamental option” of the rich young man, who is more comfortable with a religion based on rules than on self-donation. Of course, the challenge is hardly new. Sts. Paul and Augustine taught that the fruit of Christian conversion is a new freedom wherein the rules (important as they are) hardly matter. This is the only possible meaning of Augustine’s “Love God and do what you will.” But this was not the message of Tridentine Catholicism, and in fact, not since Augustine has there been so much emphasis in sound Catholic theology on personal freedom.

The new Christian humanism proposed by the council and John Paul II is the only possible solution to the crisis within the Church. The modern world wants “freedom.” The rebels within the Church want “freedom.” Complaints about the Church are mainly about its moral teachings, which are perceived as putting a lid on everyone’s freedom. This problem isn’t going to be solved by a further insistence on the rules, but rather by a call to holiness and a positive vision of the human person and the uses of his freedom.

This is what the pontificate of John Paul II has been all about. Those who view him as an authoritarian who keeps tightening the screws are not paying attention. This papacy is all about freedom. But the pope insists that authentic freedom is based on the truth about the human person; otherwise, it will be a counterfeit and make us unhappy. Building on the council, he has proposed a sweeping vision of the human person that invites us into depths barely touched by the old scholastic casuistry. Right now, those in the Church who are shaping its future are busy unpacking these teachings.

John Paul’s writings basically try to answer the question, What is man? Having lived under the two worst totalitarianisms that the 20th century had to offer, he’s convinced that the principal philosophical error of modern times is a misreading of the human person. Today, either man is a thing—a chemical accident, a mere collation of atoms—or he’s a Cartesian ghost inhabiting a machine. The first reading leads straight to the concentration camps and abortion mills. If man is no more than disposable biological matter, then disposable biological matter he will be. The second reading, which is that of dissenters from the Church’s sexual teachings, treats the body as an extrinsic object that can be manipulated for whatever purpose. Put another way: It erroneously supposes that what we do with our bodies has little to do with who we are. This led to the sexual revolution.

The pope answers the Darwinian proposal of man as a “thing” by insisting on our mystery and transcendence. Human creativity—everything from the Sistine Chapel to the infield fly rule—cannot be a mere epiphenomenon of matter. Nor can human love. We are created in the image of a Trinitarian God, three persons in the act of eternal, mutual self-giving. We have the “law of gift” inscribed in our being. There are two sentences from *Gaudium et Spes* that John Paul quotes repeatedly; they are the leitmotiv of his pontificate. First: Man “can fully find his true self only in the sincere gift of self.” In other words, contrary to our hedonist culture’s notions of happiness, we find our humanity more in self-giving than self-assertion, in relationship rather than self-sufficiency. And the second is like it: “Christ the new Adam...fully reveals man to himself.” The truth about ourselves is ultimately not a proposition but a Person, who Himself is defined by total self-donation.

As for the second modern error about man—the Cartesian ghost in the machine—the pope’s answer is to be found in his voluminous writings about marriage and sexuality. These writings are extraordinarily important. They are the best response to the modern world’s principal objection to the Catholic Church. As early as 1926, G. K. Chesterton predicted that the “next great heresy” would be an attack on sexual morality, and in recent decades every institution has surrendered except the Church. The Church needs to explain her teachings about sex to the world—and also to herself, since it’s safe to say that three-quarters of American Catholics don’t accept them. This should be the first area of the Church’s self-evangelization, and it is going to be mainly the work of the laity.

First, what’s the position of dissenting theologians regarding sex? They want to baptize the sexual morality of the post-Kinsey culture. How do they get there? By arguing the primacy of conscience (the autonomous self as a little god, decreeing right and wrong); by divorcing personhood from the body (a Cartesian anthropology that posits a free-floating “I” that has nothing to do with one’s concrete acts); and by consulting “experience” rather than nature (which in practice allows the three concupiscences to run on their own program).

The pope’s responses to the dissenters, and to the culture in general, are deep and convincing. First, he argues that the purpose of a conscience isn’t to manufacture the truth but to locate it. Truth is something we discover rather than invent. And once we do find a truth, there isn’t merely an obedient and grudging application, but rather a creative response that translates it into positive virtues. Second, the pope vigorously rejects the idea of man as a vaporous “subject” that happens to have a body. We are our bodies, and we are what we do with our bodies. And when it comes to sex, our body has a language, a nuptial meaning that expresses the “law of gift” written at the core of our being. The pope insists that sex is such a deep and wonderful thing that when you use it improperly inside or outside marriage, making

your partner an object, a vehicle of pleasure, the result will be the “culture of death” that’s all around us.

In fact, if Catholic dissenters were serious about consulting “experience,” they would look honestly at the results of the sexual revolution. What they would see are the results of a denial of nature, of the “truth” about our sexuality. The question finally is whether we create ourselves on our own or receive our nature as gift. Adam and Eve chose the first option; their sin was not about an inordinate love of apples but about freeing themselves from the “givens” God put in their nature. It is an impulse shared by heterodox theologians. But we’ve discovered—as did our first parents—that this “liberation” is a false freedom. The pope argues that the human person is truly free only when he acts on truths that are received and not invented. The perfection of freedom doesn’t consist in radical self-creation but in the choice to live in accord with our nature.

One of the hopeful signs in the Church today is that energized laity like Christopher West, Janet Smith, Mary Beth Bonacci, John Haas, and others are out there explaining to audiences the beauty of the pope’s “theology of the body.” There already is some recognition among twenty-something Catholics that the baby boomers didn’t exactly solve the mystery of sex and that it must mean something more than an exchange of pleasure between consenting adults. The pope has the answer: It is an exchange of persons, and its ramifications are never entirely private. The health of the entire culture depends on it. Which is why the pope has spent so much intellectual energy explaining sex to a culture trying to evacuate it of its mystery and transcendence.

But this pontificate is about much more than sex and marriage. It is a clarion call to evangelize the culture, which John Paul II insists is what really drives history. Catholics have to stop being preoccupied with intra-Church issues and recover a sense of having a message for the world. For centuries—maybe since the Treaty of Westphalia—the Faith has been privatized, so that many Catholics think it’s mainly something you carry around inside your head. Vatican II proposed evangelization as the deepest identity of the Church, but it’s going to require some digging to recover this lost truth.

We need a great relearning guided by the true “spirit” of Vatican II. The Church is going to have to rebuild itself from the bottom up by personal decisions made by Catholics inspired by the rich teachings of the Magisterium. The three most important realities in the Church today are a great teaching pontificate, the lay initiatives at the grass roots, and the new religious orders whose demographics are the reverse of the older ones. History tells us that this is more than enough for a new springtime of faith.

But for the renewal to gain momentum, there's one change demanded by the council that has yet to happen: the retirement of the old clericalism, the idea that priests and nuns constitute the "real" Church. Most laity still have the odd notion that they must wait for a signal from the bishop or local pastor to do anything. The council taught that if you have the Faith, you spread it. John Paul's understanding of this point may come from his experience in Poland, where visible, clerical-mandated lay associations were virtually impossible under the Communist authorities; individual Catholics had to show initiative and not wait for clerical permission to live their Christian vocation.

Finally, a Catholic restoration will depend on individuals who answer the call to holiness. Cardinal Ratzinger, who has been more sober than John Paul in his assessment of the aftermath of the council, knows his Church history well enough to sense that the legacy of an ecumenical council is always at risk: "Whether or not the Council becomes a positive force in the history of the Church depends only indirectly on texts and organizations; the crucial question is whether there are individuals—saints—who, by their personal willingness, which cannot be forced, are ready to effect something new and living.... [It] depends on those who will transform its words into the life of the Church."

This generation of Catholics has been given much by the Magisterium. Much should be asked of it.

*George Sim Johnston is a member of the Crisis executive board and author of *Did Darwin Get It Right?* (Our Sunday Visitor, 1998).*

Reprinted with permission from Crisis Magazine, www.crisismagazine.com