

VATICAN II AT 60

Re-Energizing the Renewal

Edited by Catherine E. Clifford
with Stephen Lampe

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Introduction

Catherine E. Clifford

One might be forgiven for not noticing that we are now sixty years from the historic meeting of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). We entered this anniversary period during a global pandemic, a global climate crisis, a crisis of migration, an outbreak of war on the European continent with global repercussions, not to mention the internal crises affecting the life of the church. We owe a debt of gratitude to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, New York, for taking the initiative to organize this lecture series, “Re-Energizing the Renewal,” helping us to keep our eye on the ball, so to speak, and not letting the clamor all around us take our focus from an attentive listening to God’s Spirit. The sixtieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council falls at a critical moment, when Catholics and other Christians urgently reflect on what is being asked of the church in our time. Vatican II remains a sure guide for its life and mission as we confront new questions and navigate new challenges.

Much attention is now focused on the Synod on Synodality (2021–2024)—a process rooted in the vision of Vatican II and aimed at mobilizing the energies of Catholics at every level of the global church, at learning to become a more synodal, participatory church. It seeks to free up the energies of all the baptized to witness and proclaim the Gospel. At the same time, preparations are quietly underway to

celebrate a Jubilee Year in 2025 with the theme “Pilgrims in Hope.” The year 2025 marks the seventeenth centenary of the first ecumenical council, the Council of Nicaea, a synodal event that gathered representatives of the whole Christian community in the fourth century to clarify our understanding of Jesus as the Son of God and Incarnate Word, the revelation of God’s love for all humanity. We continue to profess the faith that has been handed down from those early Christians each time we recite the Nicene Creed and en flesh its message in works of mercy.

It has been suggested that the best preparation for this renewal of the pilgrim people of God is a careful rereading of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, with particular attention to the four constitutions: the Constitution on Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*). This volume provides a solid introduction to those texts. Chapters dedicated to the various council documents help us to understand the context of their elaboration, their central teachings, and the challenge of receiving them today, of letting their insights more fully inform the life and practice of the church. They also recognize the limits of the council’s teaching and the need for fresh thinking in the face of new and unforeseen challenges.

Chapters 1 and 2 lay out the context of the Second Vatican Council. In the first, I attempt to show how the task facing the church on the eve of the council, as today, was to find a way of teaching and witnessing to the Gospel that would speak to contemporary people, of acknowledging the movements of God’s Spirit in the world, and of bringing a message of hope to those in need. The insight of the German Jesuit Karl Rahner concerning the coming of age of a “world church” at Vatican II provides a lens for understanding the

deepening consciousness of the global Catholic community of the need for a more profound integration of faith with the riches of every culture. Though we inhabit a very different world today, the council's teaching and way of proceeding continue to guide and inspire us. Paul Lakeland reflects on how Vatican II's teaching was marked by the contributions of four exemplary theologians (Bernard Lonergan, SJ; Karl Rahner, SJ; Yves Congar, OP; John Courtney Murray, SJ). Insights that matured in movements of biblical, liturgical, and theological renewal were received into official Catholic teaching. The sixteen council documents are informed by a deeper sense of historicity; a return to the early sources of the life and prayer of the church; a fresh understanding of the dignity of each person created in the image of God, who speaks in the depths of every conscience; and a renewed appreciation of the universality of God's offer of saving grace. As Lakeland contends, these developments were hard-won in the anti-Modernist climate that reigned in the early twentieth century and in the lively confrontation of ideas that ensued in the conciliar debate. Not surprisingly, their reception has been neither easy nor unmitigated.

Chapters 3 to 6 treat the four constitutions of Vatican II and their importance today. John Baldovin, SJ, reflects on the first document promulgated by the council, the Constitution on the Liturgy. Essentially a charter for reform, its principles guided the revision of the Roman Rite of the sacraments and the development of new lectionaries for Sundays and weekdays. Baldovin shows how closely these principles of the liturgy—an action of the gathered people of God—are related to the council's ecclesiology. In chapter 4 Brian Flanagan reflects on how the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church's renewed understanding of the dignity and equality of all the baptized is still being received as we seek to re-enliven the church in synodal styles of leadership and structures for participation and shared decision-making and discernment. While the documents of Vatican

II never use the word “synodality,” the council itself was a synodal gathering, an event that gave us a foretaste of the dynamic synergy that is possible when the people of God come together and place all their gifts at the service of God’s mission. In chapter 5 Ormond Rush explores the dynamic and synodal way the church receives God’s self-revelation in his consideration of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. He aptly shows how God continues to speak and we grow in understanding whenever that revelation is re-received through the dynamic interaction of the baptized faithful, theologians, and bishops. In chapter 6 Marcus Mescher considers the strengths and limits of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, the first conciliar document in the history of the church addressed to all people of goodwill. He shows how its teaching continues to influence the search for a church in solidarity with all, especially with the poor, and open to fraternal collaboration with people of all religions and no religion in service of a world that is more just.

Chapters 7 to 10 explore some of the challenges of receiving the council’s teaching in the present. Elyse J. Raby looks in chapter 7 at the council’s recognition of the dignity and equality of women and the continuing task, despite important progress, of integrating the gifts of women and of differently gendered persons more fully into the life of the church. In chapter 8 Celia Deutsch, NDS, revisits the council’s historic recognition of all that is good and true in other religions and its categorical rejection of all forms of anti-Semitism, underlining the values of dialogue and collaboration that are sorely needed in the polarized context of our day. In chapter 9 Gerald O’Collins, SJ, reflects on the council’s teaching as a resource for a spirituality that is Christ-centered, nourished by the Word of God and by our participation in the paschal mystery through the liturgy.

A final chapter by Cardinal Robert McElroy shows how the synod and synodality, and Pope Francis’s conviction

that synodality is “what God expects of the church in the third millennium,” are deeply rooted in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, the synodal process now underway, the fruits of which Cardinal McElroy helpfully summarizes, is to be seen as a new stage in the reception of the council’s teaching.

I am most grateful to all our contributors for their passionate and engaging reflections. They help to show how the teaching and the experience of the Second Vatican Council remain a vital touchstone for understanding the nature and mission of the church. Thanks as well to Stephen Lampe for his generous assistance in the preparation of this monograph. May it serve as a rich and informative resource for readers and help to re-energize the forces of renewal at work in the church today.