

Vatican II and the Year of Faith: How Vatican II Made me a Catholic

When Pope Benedict called for "A Year of Faith," he asked us to reflect specifically on the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. The aim of this column has been to respond to the Pope's instruction. In our own diocese of Birmingham, we concluded our public celebration of the Year of Faith on October 6. In view of that conclusion, I thought it appropriate to offer some general reflections on the Council. I would also like to write about how the Council influenced my decision to become Catholic.

I grew up as a very anti-Catholic Christian. I imbibed all the worst stereotypes about the Catholic faith. When I finally began to study Church history in earnest, I read the Church's history in light of that bias. Because I thought that the Church was intolerant, superstitious, authoritarian, and obscurantist, I tended to find those traits in her history. Eventually, I tested my judgments of Catholic doctrine against Scripture and history. I found flaws in my reasoning. But, still, the cultural biases remained. I saw the Church as intolerant, triumphalistic, and chauvinistic.

The Church's relationship to modernity and to the non-Catholic world was a problem for me. As a Protestant, I knew men and women of goodwill who loved God and the Scriptures, and who lived lives of obvious faith, devotion, and goodness. I also recognized the obvious social goods of freedom, conscience, and representative democracy. I valued an intelligent faith, personal study, and the individual reading of Scripture. My *perception* was that the Catholic Church opposed such things. Protestants were anathema. Modernity was uniformly bad.

It was, I think, for men like me that Pope John XXIII called the Council. His stated goal was not to change the teaching of the church, but to present it more favorably, and to counter these stereotypes. "The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing," he said, "and the way in which it is presented is another."

The Pope asked, specifically, for reflection on the points of commonality between Catholics and non-Catholics. In his opening address to the council, the Pope reaffirmed the timeless validity of Catholic truth, while acknowledging his openness to the positive developments of the modern world:

It is necessary first of all that the Church should never depart from the sacred patrimony of truth received from the Fathers. But at the same time she must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world, which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate.

The Pope's project brought about tremendously good fruit. All the council documents reaffirmed the timeless nature of Catholic truth, but they presented it with great subtlety, sophistication, and a sensitivity to the "elements of sanctification and truth" found outside the Catholic Church. The central text of the council on this theme is found in *Lumen Gentium*:

This is the one Church of Christ which in the Creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic . . . erected for all ages as "the pillar and mainstay of the truth." This Church

constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him, *although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure*. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity.

What I found in the council was beautiful. On the one hand, there were clear claims to uniqueness and authority. The Council gave up nothing of the Church's doctrine on the Papacy, the bishops, Scripture, tradition, family, society, and traditional Catholic morality. But, at the same time, she recognized those obvious truths - those "elements of truth and sanctification" - that exist beyond her boundaries.

The Council also set the faith deeply in its biblical and historical context. The Fathers strove always for the bigger picture, an integrated picture. And finally, for me, the vernacular liturgy was a boon. Though I have now come to appreciate more deeply the traditional language of the Roman Rite (Latin), my first approach to the Mass was enhanced by the liturgical Reforms implemented after the Council. In particular, I was deeply impressed by how much Scripture was read aloud - Old Testament, Psalms, Epistles, and Gospels. It became clear to me, because of the Council, that the Catholic Church did not devalue Scripture.

There were many controversies in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Some people mistakenly took the Council as an excuse to jettison elements of Catholic truth - something the Pope specifically warned against. Others refused the Pope's call for a respectful dialogue with the non-Catholic world. But the ultimate vindication of the Council, in my mind, is the number of those who have been drawn to Catholic truth through her teaching. The Council helped me overcome my false impressions of the Church. But I am not alone. Increasingly, even non-Catholic Christians now look to the Church as the "pillar and bulwark of the truth." As Protestant Historian Mark Noll wrote:

Whenever evangelicals in recent years have been moved to admonish themselves and other evangelicals for weaknesses in ecclesiology, tradition, the intellectual life, sacraments, theology of culture, aesthetics, philosophical theology, or historical consciousness, the result has almost always been selective appreciation for elements of the Catholic tradition. (*First Things*, 10/2004)

When Bl. Pope John Paul II presented the Catechism of the Catholic Church to the world, he presented it as an outgrowth of the Second Vatican Council. (Fidei Depositum). This is the easiest and surest avenue to a proper understanding of the Council. Its goal is "to guard and present better the precious deposit of Christian doctrine in order to make it more accessible to the Christian faithful and to all people of good will." As the Year of Faith draws to a close, be sure to keep the Catechism and the Council close to your head and to your heart.