

"The Second Vatican Council and the Year of Faith "
David Anders

Fr. Richard John Neuhaus once spoke of the late 20th century as "The Catholic Moment." He was a Lutheran pastor when he penned those words, but Neuhaus understood something important about the Catholic Church in the modern world. For Fr. Neuhaus, the Catholic Church was uniquely situated to confront the modern crisis of unbelief. Like the Popes he so respected, Neuhaus saw the Second Vatican Council as a watershed event that had equipped all Catholics for a prophetic ministry of evangelization.

But why? What did the council bring that was so significant? The Council taught no new dogmas. Instead, it offered an inspiring vision of the Church as the means of salvation *to which all men are called and in which each may play his part.* The Council fathers wanted us to see our faith in relationship to God and to fellow Catholics, but also to the wider culture and society. They proposed a careful order between the divine and the human, between the heavenly and the everyday.

With this in mind, the Council emphasized that the Church is the new *People of God.* God does not save us merely as individuals, but with an eye to the renewal of the whole human family. Thus, the Council's central text, *Lumen Gentium*, describes the Church itself as a sacrament- a sign and instrument of unity with God and the whole human race. The Christian who lives his faith with sincerity and generosity can help bring salvation not only to himself, but to the world.

In the Decree *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council considered the relation of this People of God to human culture. It taught that a true and full humanity can come through the goods and values of culture, like law, medicine, philosophy, science, art, education, and industry. But these goods and values can only be fully realized in light of the Gospel. The Catholic "in the world," engaged in thoroughly human pursuits, therefore has an indispensable role in the work of salvation.

The Council also considered how this People of God passes on the heritage the faith. The constitution *Dei Verbum* taught that interpretation of the faith belongs solely to the Magisterium, but the whole people of God plays an indispensable role in its transmission. "Holding to, practicing and professing the heritage of the faith, it becomes on the part of the bishops and faithful a single common effort." The Council's other decrees and declarations reflected further on this transmission of the faith, its celebration in liturgy and sacrament, and its application to particular circumstances.

The council recognized the value of human life and culture, but also that this value can only be grasped in light of our transcendent dignity as children of God, redeemed by Christ. John Paul II, interpreting the council, wrote:

He who is the 'image of the invisible God' (*Col 1:15*), is himself the perfect man who has restored in the children of Adam that likeness to God which had been disfigured ever since the first sin. Human nature, by the very fact that it was assumed, not absorbed, in him, has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare. (John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*)

Pope John Paul II saw the Council and its message at the heart of his call for a *New Evangelization*. The modern world has made great technological progress, but risks losing a genuine sense of human dignity. Many lands that are historically Christian have seen the faith in retreat. For this reason, the Pope called for a renewed missionary effort, not only in lands untouched by the Gospel, but even in historically Christian countries.

John Paul II saw the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as a pillar in this work of the *New Evangelization*. The Catechism was inspired by the Council and deeply informed by its teaching. When he presented the Catechism to the world, John Paul II said it was to be the "authentic reference text for teaching Catholic doctrine." It would offer an authoritative interpretation for teaching the Council's doctrines to future generations. (John Paul II, *Fidei Depositum*)

Pope Benedict XVI has named this year *The Year of Faith*. He has asked that we make the Second Vatican Council (and the Catechism) our reference point for understanding the faith:

It seemed to me that timing the launch of the Year of Faith to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council would provide a good opportunity to help people understand that the texts bequeathed by the Council Fathers, in the words of Blessed John Paul II, "*have lost nothing of their value or brilliance*. They need to be read correctly, to be widely known and taken to heart as important and normative texts of the Magisterium, within the Church's Tradition ... I feel more than ever in duty bound to point to the Council as *the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century*. (Pope Benedict XVI, *Apostolic Letter Porta Fidei*)

Pope Paul VI once said that the first task of evangelism is to evangelize ourselves. In this *Year of Faith*, we can carry out the call of the Council to be *The People of God* by first learning our faith. A good way to start would be to read the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, or *The Compendium*. Read the Council documents. Read Holy Scripture. Sign up for R.C.I.A. Embrace the challenge of the Holy Father to make this year about our faith. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." *Let's try to make our light a little brighter this year!*