The Impact of the Second Vatican Council: A Personal Odyssey

by Donald Senior, C.P.

Celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Vatican II has had a much stronger effect on me than I had anticipated. Recalling the days of the Council and reviewing its documents have brought back to me a lot of memories and, more importantly, made me more aware of the profound impact the event of the Council has had on my life.

In many ways, my adult life, including my life as a priest, a religious and a professor and administrator at Catholic Theological Union, have been profoundly influenced at every turn by the Council. Pope John XXIII was elected in October of 1958 and announced his inspiration to convene the Council in January 1959. That summer, after my second year of college, I entered the Passionist Novitiate nestled in the cornfields of St. Paul, Kansas. Even in the confines of the novitiate we learned of the new Pope's exceptional warmth and open spirit, including his enthusiastic reception at the Vatican of our newly elected president John Kennedy and his wife Jacqueline (the Pope greeted her as “Jackie!” and opened his arms to embrace her—much to the consternation of his aides). We also knew he had convened the first ecumenical council in a century but as a novice I had little awareness of what this would mean for the Church, much less for me.

In the summer of 1960 I went from Kansas to Chicago where we had our philosophy program. All during the three years I was there we heard of the exciting events beginning to unfold at the Council. Copies of “Xavier Rhynne’s” tell-all articles that appeared regularly in The New Yorker magazine were passed around and read eagerly. I can remember vividly the sense of deep sadness in June 1963 when we gathered around a radio (the television set was wheeled out only for momentous occasions such as President Kennedy's famous speech on October 22, 1962 concerning the Cuban missile crisis) and heard the announcement of Pope John XXIII’s death. His famous dying words, “My bags are packed and ready to go…” seemed to exemplify his serene and beautiful spirit. Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini, who was everybody's favorite to be the successor, was elected as Pope Paul VI, and people were relieved that the Council would be reconvened and keep on track.

During my four years of theology (1963-67), first at the Passionist theologate in Louisville, Kentucky and then the final two years at St. Meinrad School of Theology, the documents of the Council began to appear one by one and became a powerful override on our theological studies. The decree on the liturgy, on the church, on divine revelation, on the church in the modern world, on relations with non-Christian religions—these were like glorious eruptions that made our faculty scramble to incorporate these new and exciting formulations into our theologi-

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cal training. The impact of the Council took a very personal turn in early 1964 when one of our own Passionist faculty, Barnabas Ahern, C.P., a professor of New Testament, was recruited by Archbishop Meyer of Chicago to be his personal “peritus” or theological advisor. Because of his extraordinary teaching skills and deep piety, Barnabas became a trusted advisor to the ensemble of American bishops at the Council and had a profound impact on their becoming comfortable with the changes being proposed by the Council. As fate would have it, the hole left in our Passionist biblical faculty led to my provincial assigning me to graduate biblical studies. Like an arranged marriage, I was not asked if I wanted to do this but told this was my destiny! In fact, although I had never contemplated a teaching ministry, I am forever grateful for this assignment—and, in a strange way, can credit Vatican II for making it possible! I began my preparation for this post-ordination assignment during the summers of my major seminary years—sweating out intense courses in Hebrew at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and Arabic at Harvard University.

After my ordination in 1967 I pursued full time graduate studies in theology and Scripture at the University of Louvain in Belgium. Even though the Council ended in 1967 it was very much alive at Louvain. Several of the most influential theologians who had a direct role in the Council had come back to Louvain’s theology faculty: Gerard Phillips and Gustav Thils, who were major contributors to Lumen Gentium and Gaudium et Spes, Louis Janssens and Philip Delhaye, whose writings on moral theology also were key for such documents as the Decree on Religious Liberty and the documents on the Church in the Modern World, Frans Neirynck, who was a consummate biblical scholar and advisor to Bishop Emiel-Jozef DeSmet, bishop of Brugge, one of the prime movers of the Council who had led the charge on making sure the document on Divine Revelation would be successful. Professor Neirynck would become my “doctor father” and I learned from him some of the contention and suffering that was also part of the cost of the Council. Opponents of Bishop DeSmet’s reform agenda took it out on the young biblical scholar who was his theological advisor—a wound that Frans Neirynck never fully recovered from.

After receiving my doctorate in 1972, I was assigned to the faculty of the newly formed Catholic Theological Union which itself came into being as a direct result of a stirring address by Cardinal Leo Josef Suenens, primate of Belgium and one of the great figures of the Council. His address at the University of Chicago in May 1964 envisioned the seminaries of the future as being located in the heart of the city, being in connection with great universities, and having an ecumenical spirit. It was that speech that ultimately led to the founding of CTU and the merging of three religious order theologates (Franciscan, Passionist, and Servite) in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago in 1968. So even where I eventually would exercise my assigned ministry of teaching the New Testament was in an institution born out of the Council! Later I would have the privilege of serving as CTU’s president for twenty-three years; never once in all that time could I have forgotten the spirit of the Council that is deeply embedded in this beloved institution.

Over the past fifty years the Church has also experienced no little turbulence in the implementation of the Council, with deepening polarities of some on the right who feel that the reforms of the Council were going too far and some on the left decrying what they see as retrenchment and a suspicion about the motives of those calling for “reform of the reform.” Historians with a longer view tell us that it is not surprising for a global Church to take a long time to digest something as momentous as an ecumenical Council.

For me personally, though, the teachings of the Council have been transformative and have been the most important influence on my Christian life. For example, the Council’s impetus for an extraordinary and sweeping biblical renewal has influenced my spiritual life, shaped my way of thinking and viewing the world, informed my vocation of teaching, and given me a deep trust in the Church itself. One of the hallmarks of the Council’s and subsequent papal and magisterial statements
about the Scriptures is that there is no intrinsic contradiction between the Word that comes to us through the Scriptures and the historical and scientific pursuit of truth.

Likewise, the Council’s call for renewal of religious life has led to enormous changes in virtually every religious community—by far, most of them to the good. My own Passionist congregation, for example, was able to free itself from some devotional practices that had a weak theological basis and in some instances were unhealthy and, instead, to rediscover the strong biblically and theological basis of our original charism of promoting the “memory of the Passion of Jesus Christ.

The “fresh air” (to use John XXIII’s famous image) brought into the Church through the Council has also profoundly shaped my understanding of what the Church was to be: the “people of God” called to holiness; a Church drawn together in prayer and in union with the Risen Christ by the beauty and power of its liturgy; a church where there is no clerical arrogance but mutuality and respect for the complementary vocations of priest, religious and laity; a communion of faith that is welcoming and hospitable to all; a community that does not fear the world but is in deep connection with its beauty, its suffering, its frailty and sinfulness (I think of the inspiring opening paragraph of Gaudium et Spes!); a Church that is not turned in on itself but is animated by its mission of evangelization to the world; a Church committed, in this increasingly pluralistic world, to dialogue and respect for other religious traditions.

These consequences of the Vatican Council’s vision of the Christian life will, I pray, stay with me for the rest of my life. It is a vision not only communicated to me by the rich conciliar documents and subsequent implementations of the Council’s directives, but also experienced in my teaching, in the robust and hopeful spirit of the Institution I have been blessed to be part of, and in the tenacious hopes of so many men and women that I have come to know as friends and co-workers and who also have been profoundly influenced by the Council over the past fifty years.

Some, I know, fear that the reforms of the Council will be suppressed or severely compromised in the years ahead. But I remember the challenging words and strong advice of Pope John XXIII at the opening of the Council on October 11, 1962: do not listen to the “prophets of doom” but trust in the power of God’s Spirit. The Church’s struggle to keep faith with the Council is, in the Pope’s own metaphor, the sign of dawn breaking upon a new day for the Church of the future.