



Off the Rails: Was Vatican II Hijacked?

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Most Catholics in 1959 probably didn't even know what an ecumenical council was. And yet, here it was. Pope John XXIII announced that the goals of the Second Vatican Council would be "the renewal of the spirit of the Gospel in the hearts of people everywhere and the adjustment of Christian discipline to modern-day living" -- a proclamation that was on the face of it ambiguous. How was authentic renewal to be achieved? How should essential discipline be adjusted to modern culture?

John was a relentless optimist, inclined always to look for good in the world, disinclined to scold, and deeply convinced that he had been called to help bring about a new Pentecost in the Church. He further believed that the Counter-Reformation era, characterized both by defensiveness inside the Church and aggressiveness toward those on the outside, was over. The council made only an oblique reference to the fact that the 20th century had already seen a persecution of Christians more severe than any in the entire history of Catholicism.

The Church was apparently flourishing during John's pontificate. By contrast with what would come later, its members were unusually serious, devout, and moral. But such a Church could be criticized as fostering formalism, a neglect of social justice, and an overly narrow piety, and it's likely that John XXIII thought that a new Pentecost could build on this foundation to reach still higher levels.

In his opening address to the council, John affirmed the infallibility of the Church but called on it to take account of the "errors, requirements, and opportunities" of the age. He regretted that some Catholics ("prophets of gloom") seemed unable to see any good in the modern world and regarded it as the worst of all historical periods. The dogmas of the

Church were settled and "known to all," so the conciliar task was to explore new ways of presenting them to the modern world.

The preparatory commissions for the council were dominated by members of the Curia, who were inclined toward precisely such a pessimistic view. When the council opened, there were objections to those commissions, with the result that the council fathers were allowed to approve new schema prepared by some of their own. In some ways this procedural squabble was the most decisive event of the entire council, and it represented a crucial victory for what was now called the "liberal" or "optimistic" party, guaranteeing that the council as a whole would look on its work as more than a mere restatement of accepted truths. There was an officially endorsed spirit of optimism in which even legitimate questions about the wisdom of certain ideas were treated as evidence of lack of faith.

The intellectual leadership of the council came mainly from Western Europe, the most influential prelates being Bernard Alfrink of the Netherlands, Leo Jozef Suenens of Belgium, Achille Lienart of France, Julius Doepfner and Joseph Frings of Germany, and Franz Koenig of Austria. Those five countries, along with the rest of Europe, possessed an ancient tradition of Catholicism, and they had nourished a vigorous and sophisticated Catholic intellectual life.

As theological questions arose, the council fathers almost automatically deferred to the opinions of these European prelates, who were in turn influenced by men recognized as the most accomplished theologians of the age -- Henri DeLubac, Jean Danielou, and Yves Congar in France; Edward Schillebeeckx in the Netherlands; Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger in Germany.

But in many respects the Church in those five nations -- with the possible exception of the Netherlands -- appeared less than robust (judging, for example, by rates of church attendance and religious vocations). Indeed, the vigorous intellectual life of those countries was colored by a certain sense of crisis -- the need to make the Faith credible to modern men. By contrast, the Church in the British Isles, Southern Europe, and the United States, to say nothing of the Third World, lacked dazzling intellectual achievements but appeared to be relatively hearty.

Most council fathers therefore seemed to have felt little urgency about most of the questions that came before them. For many, the discussions involved issues that, before now, hadn't even been considered, such as making the liturgy and religious life more "relevant." But an unquestioned faith that the Church would always be preserved from error, along with the leadership of John XXIII and Paul VI, led most of the delegates to support the schema that were finally forged from the debate. No decree of the council provoked more than a small number of dissenting votes. Ironically, in view of the later claim that the council brought about the democratization of the Church, deference to authority was a major factor in determining how most of the fathers voted.

Creating Radicals

John XXIII announced Vatican II as a "pastoral" assembly, but there were growing differences of opinion as to what exactly that meant. Pious, instinctively conservative prelates might think of encouraging Marian devotions or kindling zeal for the foreign

missions. The dominant group, however, moved the council toward dialogue with the modern world, translating the Church's message into a language modern men understood.

The council fathers always strove to remain balanced. To take what are now the most fiercely debated issues, they imagined no revisions in Catholic moral teaching about sexuality, referring instead to "the plague of divorce" and to the "abominable crime" of abortion. Deliberately childless marriages were deemed a tragedy, and the faithful were reminded of the Church's condemnation of artificial birth control.

At the same time, the fact that practically every aspect of Catholic belief seemed to be under discussion had results that John XXIII probably didn't intend. Famously, at one point he removed the subject of contraception from the floor of the council and announced that he was appointing a special commission to study the issue -- an action that naturally led some to believe the teaching would indeed be revised. When Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, liberals were outraged that he rejected the commission's recommendation to permit some forms of birth control and accused him of betraying the council.

The council fathers each had *periti*, or advisers, on matters of theology and canon law, and some of them were very influential, both in shaping the thought of the prelates whom they advised and in working behind the scenes with like-minded delegates and other *periti*. In explaining the theological revolution that occurred almost immediately after the council, some orthodox Catholics speculate that a well-organized minority intended from the beginning to sabotage the council and that they successfully planted theological time bombs in the conciliar decrees -- doctrinal statements whose implications were deliberately left vague, to be activated later. But there's little evidence of this.

It's characteristic of revolutions that they are rarely planned ahead of time. Rather, they arise from the sudden acceleration of historical change, caused by the flow of events and the way in which people relate to those events. There is no evidence that anyone came to the council with a radical agenda, in part because such an agenda would have been considered hopelessly unrealistic. (Some liberals actually feared that the council would prove to be a retrogressive gathering.)

A major factor in the postconciliar dynamic was the reformers' own heady experience of swift and unexpected change. For example, in 1960 no one would have predicted -- and few would have advocated -- the virtual abandonment of the Latin liturgy. But once reformers realized that the council fathers supported change, it became an irresistible temptation to continue pushing farther and faster. What had been thought of as stone walls of resistance turned out to be papier-mâché.

The council itself proved to be a "radicalizing" experience, during which men who had never met before, and who in some cases had probably given little thought to the questions now set before them, began quickly to change their minds on major issues. (For example, Archbishop -- later Cardinal -- John F. Dearden of Detroit, who was considered quite rigid before the council, returned home as an uncritical advocate of every kind of change.) When the council was over, some of those present -- both *periti* and bishops -- were prepared to go beyond what the council had in fact intended or authorized, using the conciliar texts as justification when possible, ignoring them when not (as recounted,

for example, by Archbishop Annibale Bugnini, who was in charge of liturgical reform after the council, in his book *The Reform of the Liturgy*). Aware that the council didn't support their agenda, they quickly got into the habit of speaking of the "spirit" of the council, which was said to transcend its actual statements and even in some cases to contradict them.

The Role of the Media

While the council was still in session, it occurred to some that it was less important what that body actually said and did than what people *thought* it said and did. Thus as early as the first session, in 1962, there was an orchestrated propaganda campaign to present the deliberations and define the issues in particular ways and to enlist the sympathies of the public on behalf of a particular agenda. Certain key journalists became "participant-observers," meaning that they reported the events and at the same time sought to influence them -- the chief practitioners being "Xavier Rynne" (the pen name of the Redemptorist historian Francis X. Murphy), who wrote "Letter from Vatican City" for the *New Yorker* magazine, and Robert Blair Kaiser, who reported for *Time*.

Such reports were written for a largely non-Catholic audience, many of whom were unsympathetic to the Faith, and the thrust of the reporting was to assure such readers that the Church was at long last admitting its many errors and coming to terms with secular culture. Most Catholics probably relied on these same sources for their understanding of the council and so received the same message.

The key reason why postconciliar "renewal" often went wrong is the almost incredible fact that the hierarchy in the early 1960s made almost no systematic effort to catechize the faithful (including priests and religious) on the meaning of the council -- something about which many bishops themselves seemed confused. "Renewal experts" sprang up everywhere, and the most contradictory explanations of the council were offered to Catholics thirsting for guidance. Bishops rarely offered their flocks authoritative teaching and instead fell into the habit of simply trusting certified "experts" in every area of Church life. Indeed, before the council was even over, several fallacious interpretations were planted that still flourish today.

Even the best journalistic accounts were forced to simplify the often subtle and complex deliberations of the council fathers. But there was also deliberate oversimplification for the purpose of creating a particular public impression. The media thus divided the council fathers into heroes and villains -- otherwise known as liberals and conservatives. In this way, the conciliar battles were presented as morality plays in which open-minded, warm-hearted, highly intelligent innovators (Cardinal Alfrink, for example) were able repeatedly to thwart plots by Machiavellian reactionaries (Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviani of the Holy Office). It was a morality play that appealed to the prejudices of many Westerners of the mid-20th century. It also had a real if immeasurable influence on many bishops, who soon discovered that being viewed as "progressive" would gain them a favorable press, while the opposite would make them into public villains.

For understandable reasons, vastly disproportionate attention was lavished by the media on such things as the vernacular liturgy and the end of mandatory Friday abstinence, since concrete practices could be easily dealt with journalistically and such practices had long helped to define the differences between Catholics and others. Catholics who

understood almost nothing of the theological issues of the council came to understand that its "real" purpose was repealing rules that had become burdensome and old-fashioned.

But in another sense the attention lavished on such things was not disproportionate, because in a sacramental Church "externals" are the doorways to the spirit. In theory it perhaps ought not to have mattered whether nuns wore habits, but in practice the modification, then the total abandonment, of those habits marked the beginning of the end of religious life as it had existed for centuries. For many people the distinction between essentials and nonessentials was almost meaningless. If Catholics were no longer forbidden to eat meat on Fridays, why could they not get divorced, *especially* given the widespread conviction that the purpose of the council and of "Good Pope John" was to make people comfortable with their faith?

Many of the council fathers, after they returned to their dioceses, seemed themselves to be in a state of confusion over what they'd done. Only a relatively few -- some orthodox, others less so -- had a clear and consistent understanding. For most, the postconciliar period proved to be a time of rudderless experimentation, as Catholics groped to understand what the council had mandated. For many people the one sure thing, amid all the postconciliar uncertainty, was the fact of change itself; in an odd way it seemed safest to do or believe almost the opposite of what Catholics had previously been taught.

The Scars of Renewal

Underlying the council were two different approaches to reform -- approaches that were not contradictory but that required serious intellectual effort to reconcile. One was *ressourcement* ("back to the sources"), a program of renewing the Church by returning to its scriptural and patristic roots (DeLubac, Danielou, and Hans Urs Von Balthasar all held to this). The other was *aggiornamento* ("updating"), by which the supposed demands of contemporary culture were the chief concern (Hans Küng, Schillebeeckx, and to some extent Rahner, were all proponents). Kept in balance during the council itself, these two movements increasingly pulled apart afterward and resulted in the deep conflicts that continue to the present.

A prime example of the postconciliar dynamic at work was the "renewal" of religious life. Cardinal Suenens wrote the influential book *The Nun in the World*, enjoining sisters to come out of their cloisters and accept the challenges of modern life. Whatever might be thought about them as theological principles, such recipes for "renewal" also promised that those who adopted them would experience phenomenal revitalization, including dramatic numerical growth, and for a few years after the council the official spirit of naive optimism won out over the "prophets of gloom."

The most famous instance of such renewal in the United States was that of the Immaculate Heart Sisters of Los Angeles. Their program of *aggiornamento* had all the ingredients required at the time -- intense publicity from an overwhelmingly favorable media, a prestigious secular "expert" (the psychologist Carl Rogers), picturesque experiments with nontraditional behavior (encounter groups), and a reactionary villain (James Cardinal McIntyre) portrayed as the only obstacle to progress. Not until it was too late did anyone ask whether the IHM Sisters, along with countless others, were simply abandoning their vocations completely.

A tragic dimension of the conciliar period was precisely the irrelevance and ultimate failure of the exciting intellectual programs that emanated from what were then the five most influential Catholic nations. For a very brief period, Dutch Catholicism made a bid to give the universal Church a working model of renewal, before "the Dutch Church" imploded and sank into oblivion. Rates of church attendance and religious vocations may have been worrisomely low in Belgium, France, and Germany in 1960, but the bishops of those countries probably couldn't imagine how much lower they would fall. In ways not recognized 40 years ago, it's now clear that the strategy of countering secularism by moving closer to the secular culture just doesn't work.

The partisans of *aggiornamento* became the first theologians in the history of the Church to make systematic use of the mass media, entering into a working alliance with journalists who could scarcely even understand the concept of *ressourcement* but eagerly promoted an agenda that required the Church to accommodate itself to the secular culture. Strangely enough, some theologians, along with their propagandist allies, actually denied the Church the right to remain faithful to its authentic identity and announced a moral obligation to repudiate as much of that identity as possible. "Renewal" came to be identified with dissent and infidelity, and Catholics who remained faithful to the Church were denounced as enemies of Vatican II.

This occurred at the most fundamental level, so that the authority of the council itself was soon relativized. The notion that a council would claim for itself final authority in matters of belief came to be viewed by liberals as reactionary. Vatican II was thus treated as merely a major historical epiphany -- a moment in the unfolding history of the Church and of human consciousness when profound new insights were discovered. According to this view, the council's function was not to make authoritative pronouncements but merely to facilitate the movement of the Church into the next stage of its historical development. (For example, the Jesuit historian John W. O'Malley in 1971 proposed that certain conciliar texts could be legitimately ignored as merely reflective of intellectual immaturity, timidity, and confusion on the part of the council fathers.)

After the council, the concept of "the People of God" was reduced to a crude form of democracy -- doctrine as determined by opinion polls. The liturgy ceased to be a divine action and became a communal celebration, and the supernatural vocations of priests and religious were deemed to be obstacles to their service to the world.

Nothing had a more devastating effect on postconciliar Catholic life than the sexual revolution, as believers began to engage in behavior not measurably different from that of non-believers. Priests and religious repudiated their vows in order to marry, and many of those who remained in religious life ceased to regard celibacy as desirable. Catholics divorced almost as frequently as non-Catholics. Church teachings about contraception, homosexuality, and even abortion were widely disregarded, with every moral absolute treated as merely another wall needing to be breached.

Off the Rails

Ultimately the single best explanation of what happened to deflect the council's decrees from their intended direction is the fact that as soon as the assembly ended, the worldwide cultural phenomenon known as the "the Sixties" began. It was nothing less

than a frontal assault on all forms of authority.

Bereft of catechesis, confused by the conciliar changes, and unable to grasp the subtle theology of the conciliar decrees, many Catholics simply translated the conciliar reforms into the terms of the counterculture, which was essentially the demand for "liberation" from all restraint on personal freedom. Even as late as 1965 almost no one anticipated this great cultural upheaval. The measured judgments of *Gaudium et Spes*, the council's highly influential decree on the Church and the modern world, shows not a hint of it.

Had the council met a decade earlier, during the relatively stable 1950s, it's possible that there could have been an orderly and untroubled transition. But after 1965 the spirit of the age was quite different, and by then many Catholics were eager to break out of what they considered their religious prison. Given the deliberately fostered popular impression that the Church was surrendering in its perennial struggle with the world, it was inevitable that the prevailing understanding of reform would be filtered through the glass of a hedonistic popular culture. Under such conditions it would require remarkable steadfastness of purpose to adhere to an authentic program of renewal.

The postconciliar crisis has moved far beyond issues like the language of the liturgy or nuns' habits -- even beyond sexual morality or gender identities. Today the theological frontier is nothing less than the stark question of whether there is indeed only one God and Jesus is His only-begotten Son. It is a question that the council fathers didn't foresee as imminent and, predictably, the council's dicta about non-Christian religions are now cited to justify various kinds of religious syncretism. The resources for resolving this issue are present in the conciliar decrees themselves, but it's by no means certain that Church leaders have the will to interpret them in final and authoritative ways. Forty years after the council, serious Catholics have good reason to think they've been left to wander the theological wilderness.

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