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“After Forty Years: Was Vatican II a Turning Point?”

The Church has been celebrating the Fortieth Anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. There are those who think that Vatican II went too far while others think it did not go far enough. Albeit good or bad, people on both sides of the argument see the Second Vatican Council as a turning point in the history of the Catholic Church. There is no argument that Vatican II made significant changes. The question of this paper is ‘Was the Second Vatican Council a major turning point in the Catholic Church or was it continuous with the history of the Church.’

Those who think it was a major turning point do so because so much *change* is associated with Vatican II. The two changes most commonly attributed to the Council was the change to mass in the vernacular and the priest began to face the people. People also perceive Vatican II as the beginnings of the lay apostolate (*Decree On The Apostolate Of The Laity Apostolicam Actuositatem*) as we know it to be today.

I would agree that Vatican II is without a doubt a major milestone within the Catholic Church. However, did it do something *completely* new? No. Take for instance, as I stated above, that many see the rise of the lay apostolate as having its origins in Vatican II. However, the laity were already *beginning* to play a more active role in the life of the Catholic Church. Vatican II advanced this role significantly but it was not a *new* creation. Even as early as the French Revolution, the laity began to play a more prominent role in the life of the Church. Other missionary associations arose during the 19th Century.

One of the most significant areas of lay involvement in the life of Church in the time between the First and Second Vatican Councils was that of social action. The official social doctrine of the Church began with *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII. This was followed by the formation of Christian Trade Unions and political action by Catholics.

In 1931, *Quadragesimo Anno* further developed the importance of this social doctrine. It included the principle of subsidiarity. Subsidiarity calls for issues to be handled at the most local level possible and this begins with the laity. To do this the Catholic Church promoted the formation of movements with a Catholic identity to accomplish the goals of the Church's social doctrine. Thus, clearly the apostolate of the laity began before Vatican II. However, the Church tried to maintain power and authority over these groups. Thus, not everything had changed.

I also mentioned above the liturgical changes associated with Vatican II of the liturgy in the vernacular and the priest facing the people. While these changes occurred with Vatican II, there were already beginning to be liturgical changes under Pius X in the early twentieth century. Then, in the 1940's and 1950's, Pius XII allowed for the vernacular to be used for some of the sacraments. He allowed for mass to be celebrated in the afternoon. He reduced the Eucharistic fast to three hours. He restored the Easter Vigil to the evening. Lastly, Pius XII allowed for the singing of "popular" music at mass. So, again, Vatican II greatly advanced liturgical reform but it did not create it.

For many years the Catholic Church was viewed as a perfect society. As a perfect society it was not without its mistakes but it was understood that the Church had everything it needed to exist separate from the rest of society. So, Catholics did not always interact with society as a whole. In the late nineteenth century, Leo XIII had a more modern vision that called for the Church to be active in the modern world while holding fast to Catholic Teaching.

Certainly, the lay apostolate of charity called for more interaction. In the midst of the Second World War, and his diplomatic background, Pius XII made the Catholic Church more present, offering to mediate disputes between sovereign nations. During World War I, Pope Benedict XV had tried to present a plan for peace himself, remnant of the heavy involvement of the pope in medieval government. Pius XIII took a different approach. He did not present his own plans as previous popes had done but simply mediated. Pius XII did not profess any authority over the secular states. He did call for the involvement of the Church in the world. The Catholic Church is heavily involved in the work of the United Nations.

Another major change in the doctrine of the Church under Pius XII was his 1943 document *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. Prior to this, the official position of the Church on the Bible was to take it literally as the Word of God dictated to the human author. Here, Pius XII allowed for Catholic Biblical Scholars to use the historical critical method in their studies opening the door for a renewed biblical understanding at Vatican II.

This is not to say the Church had totally transformed prior to Vatican II. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, all clerics in the Church were required to take the Oath against Modernism. This continued until after Vatican II. The Church continued to deal with some matters with its traditional method of condemnation without dialogue.

Turning to a different perspective to examine whether Vatican II was a new change or part of ongoing change we turn to how Vatican II was called. Prior to Vatican II, the previous ecumenical councils were dogmatic in nature; they were called to resolve issues of church teaching. At the time of Vatican II, there were still some questions that had been on the agenda for the First Vatican Council that had never been fully addressed and other issues had arisen. Both Pius XI and Pius XII had formed commissions to evaluate whether or not the First Vatican

Council should be reopened to address doctrinal issues involving communism, war, missions, Catholic Action, and culture. In the end in both cases it was decided to handle the issues through regular papal documents rather than reopen Vatican I.

However, when Pope John XXIII called Vatican II, it was not called to settle specific doctrinal issues. In fact, it was not called to resolve any specific issues at all. John XXIII called for it in order to profess Christian Unity by first professing Catholic unity. After he called for the Council, a letter was sent to all bishops and theologians asking for suggestions on what needed to be addressed. Obviously, the Church was already changing or the Council never would have been called without specific issues in mind.

However, the Church continued to do some of its traditional practices even in the midst of Vatican II. The preparatory work on draft documents was handled through the various curial offices. The curia was not in favor of major change and attempted to steer the Council. However, more change was coming. At the first Vatican Council, the Church was mainly a European body but by the time of Vatican II it was a global body including representation from many third world countries who had a different view on Church life.

A further evidence of change already occurring in the Church was the formation of the Secretariat for Christian Unity and the invitation of non-Catholic observers to Vatican II. The Church had taught no salvation outside the Church and had little interest in dialogue with non-Catholic Christians. Obviously, the invitation of these observers indicated a shift in Catholic understanding prior to Vatican II.

Thus, it seems to clear to me that Vatican II does not represent an instantaneous shift in Catholic thinking. Vatican II built upon changes that were already beginning prior to the Council. There is continuity of the Post Vatican II Church with the Catholic Church in the early

twentieth century. Yet, it is clear that Vatican II is a significant point in the history of the Church. Change does not happen fast in the Catholic Church. It seldom does and there are both good and bad reasons for slow change. It seems to me that Vatican II could not have happened without the foundational development from Pope Leo XIII leading up through Pius XII. Would all the changes of Vatican II happened without an ecumenical council? I would say at the very least Vatican II sped the process along.

If one insists on finding a turning point in the history of the Catholic Church in the Twentieth Century, then the Second Vatican Council is a good place to begin. It is clearly one of the most significant events in the Church of the twentieth century. At Vatican II, the Catholic Church defined the direction it would go in, a direction it had already been heading in. The Second Vatican Council gave new voice that spoke from the whole Church to what had already begun.