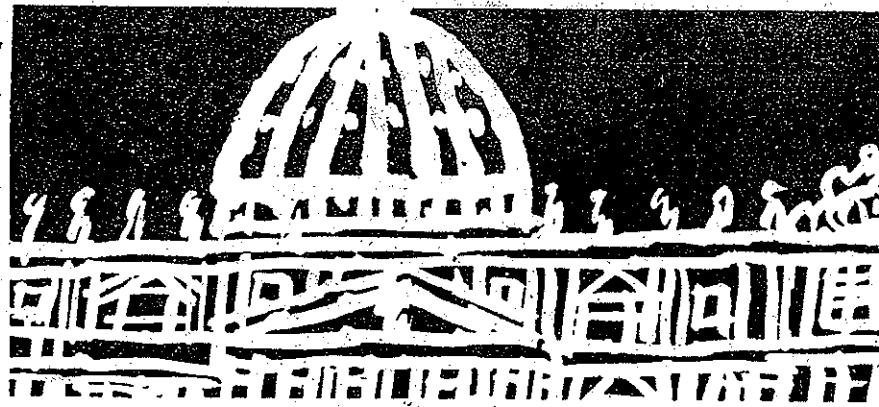


Vatican II: twenty years later



Reconstructing Catholic consciousness
after 'that superbly destructive Council'

ROBERT P. IMBELL

TWENTY YEARS AGO this October, I (together with thousands of others) descended, with much curiosity and some hope, into the vast St. Peter's Square for the opening of the Second Vatican Council.

Had I been more knowledgeable about the past, my awe would doubtless have been greater at witnessing this solemn inauguration of the Catholic church's Twenty-First Ecumenical Council. Had I been more prescient of the future, I would certainly have paid closer heed to the mild first tremors which, ultimately, would shake the very foundations of traditional Catholicism. However, being neither historian nor prophet, but only a seminarian about to embark upon the study of theology (in Latin!), I was content to watch (and, of course, photograph) the last untroubled procession of the Counter-Reformation church, whose passing, lamented or not, is more certain than is the form of what will follow upon it.

Another image associated with those ante-revolutionary days twenty-odd eons ago rises Proust-like from the mists of memory. This at the end of June 1963, upon the death of John XXIII and the election of Giovanni Battista Montini as Paul VI. A group of some twenty New York priests and seminarians, studying in Rome at the time, were shepherded by Francis Cardinal Spellman through Vatican corridors, past clusters of astonished archbishops and miffed monsignori, to be among the first received in audience by the new pope.

We were, in retrospect, a mixed bag, reveling in the heady atmosphere of new-found freedom, aspiring somewhat pretentiously but quite earnestly to the relatively painless realization

of theology and church brought up to date, ecumenically tolerant of the aging Spellman and unabashedly enthusiastic about the urbane Montini. We represented, however modestly, the vigor and promise of an American church come of age. Within the year John F. Kennedy, whom the same eager group had scurried to meet at the North American College on the occasion of his visit to Rome, had been assassinated; and the slow descent into the maelstrom had begun. Of that representative band, half have since resigned from the ordained priesthood. Not quite the "signs of the times" foreseen by the drafters of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World; yet signs of the times nonetheless.

Perhaps my earliest intimation that Vatican II's "*aggiornamento*" would entail much more than most of us had bargained for came during a retreat made in the Fall of 1967, directed by a venerable and wise Camaldolese monk. From the vantage of his hermitage he sensed that the "updating" espoused by the Council was some seven centuries late in coming. His intuition still strikes me as cogent. He mused that, when Dante began to write in the vernacular, the church ought to have followed suit in its theology and liturgy. Instead, it rested in the secure and rich culture in which it had grown comfortable; only to have the living language of a cultural elite slowly and imperceptibly become the dead dialect of a ghetto.

It was sobering to ponder during that retreat how longstanding had been the progressive dissociation of church and world, of theology and culture. In view of the long-postponed dialogue, any prospect of easy *aggiornamento* faded rapidly. Perhaps the symbolic realization of this came to the English-speaking church on the occasion of the first faint steps toward liturgical updating, joining Latin and English in an odd and impossible mix, with the congregation at one moment responding "*et cum spiritu tuo*" and at the next "and also with

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you." That strange hybrid soon gave way to a full translation of the whole Mass into the vernacular — which is certainly *more* than the initial tinkering, yet considerably *less* than the reinterpretation of rite and symbol desired by many.

This conflict of "more" and "less" marks the experience of the past twenty years and continues into the disorder and discontent of the present. Whether in liturgy, in ministry, or in ecclesiology generally, more options are available than had ever been dreamed possible in pre-Vatican II days. Yet there is widespread disappointment at unrealized hopes and dismay at an often superficial adjustment rather than a truly radical transformation. Twenty years later the fruits of the Second Vatican Council seem not unlike the primordial fruit of Eden: having tasted, our eyes are now opened, the way back is barred, the way forward uncertain. With apt paradox, therefore, Rosemary Haughton speaks of Vatican II as "that superbly destructive Council."

WHAT, THEN, has been destroyed? Intentionally or not, John XXIII and the Council he convened brought an end to the era of post-Reformation Catholicism which Trent had structured and Vatican I had reinforced. This traditional Catholicism, for all its considerable achievements, saw reality in an essentially dualist way: sacred/profane, church/world, clergy/laity were distinctions both real and radical, founded in the divinely constituted order of things. Catholic consciousness and practice proceeded from these fundamental dichotomies to construct a symbol system which both reflected and reinforced this primal split.

Hence sacred liturgy needed a sacral language for its congruent celebration. Church embodies a "perfect society" with its peculiar goals, means, government, law, and, if need be, penalties and sanctions over against an increasingly hostile civil society. Men and women "left the world" to follow Christ on the more perfect path of the evangelical counsels, relegating others to a sort of second-class citizenship in the City of God. There were discrepancies, no doubt, in the symbol system and its functioning; but it was powerful and compelling enough to create and sustain a defiant alternative to the drift and threat of modernity. And it attracted converts! There was something costly about being Catholic; a distinguishable religious vision and identity was offered which, despite its difficulties, appeared profoundly appealing.

That there was much of the superficial and the parochial in the vision and practice of traditional Catholicism goes without saying. That its strong sense of identity seemed more and more purchased at the price of intellectual and cultural schizophrenia proved, ultimately, its undoing. But unless one appreciates the profound strengths, both spiritual and sociological, of traditional Catholicism, one cannot, I think, take the measure of the current malaise nor risk the needed reconstruction. For the bare, ruined choirs housed, however inadequately, something of profoundest import, whose seeming absence renders us all relatively alienated and homeless.

At the heart of the matter, as Rosemary Haughton has been insistently reminding us for some fifteen years now, is lan-

guage. Despite its desiccated dogmatism, traditional Catholicism still carried strands of sheer poetry — whether in its Gregorian chant, its sacramental symbols, or its ecclesial universalism. It spoke in strange and foreign speech of the reality of God and the foundational importance of human community. It brought to expression the yearning of millions for meaning in their lives and anchored it in the rock of catholic and apostolic faith.

This linguistic universe, for all its imposing grandeur, crumbled the first time priest turned to people and mumbled, however inarticulately, "the Lord be with you." The fierce reactionaries present at the Second Vatican Council probably appreciated the rules (and the fragility) of "language-games" better than their reformist antagonists. Their "blessed rage for order" translated itself into a passionate defense of the linguistic status quo, convinced that, once the language were tampered with, disorder would certainly follow. They proved prophets *ante eventum*: for the rule of Latin in matters ecclesiastical has seemingly yielded to linguistic (and ecclesial) anarchy.

A recent study by an English sociologist, William McSweeney, fascinatingly chronicles that anarchy. His book is entitled *Roman Catholicism: The Search for Relevance* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980). It is must reading for all would-be reformers. Unlike others who have attacked the aftermath of Vatican II from the perspective of romanticized, at times dishonest, reading of the past, McSweeney approaches his task with a definite sympathy for the reformers, tempered by incredulity at their sociological naiveté. Historians will find in his work incisive insights into the increasing centralization of Roman Catholicism since the French Revolution, culminating in the rule of the "Pian popes," while theologians will admire his pointed survey of the "new theology" of de Lubac, Congar, and Chenu, painstakingly preparing the theological stage for Vatican II. But historians and theologians alike can only be given pause by his measured conclusion that Roman Catholicism's contemporary search for relevance has led to the dead end of irrelevance, that *aggiornamento* has degenerated into mere accommodation, and that the liberally lauded "pluralism" of doctrinal expression is theological sleight-of-hand to camouflage the *de facto* promiscuity of contemporary Catholic belief and practice.

These are "hard sayings," and not ones that I personally would accept without important qualifications. But it may be salutary to take seriously the suggestion of a friendly observer and critic that the emperor (or, in this case, Mother Church), having put aside her triumphalist regalia, might indeed be prancing about in the buff. Put in slightly less poetic fashion, McSweeney's book seems to me to present a striking instance of Peter Berger's dictum that sociology is the "fiery brook" through which theology today must pass. If one maintains (as I do) that Vatican II's "deconstruction" was both evangelically justified and historically appropriate, then the crucial question on the ecclesial agenda twenty years later is whether the same might be said of the "reconstruction" we envision or, conversely, fail to envision. Is it Roman Catholicism which is

being reconstructed, and what criteria do we have for deciding the issue?

Were I asked to state briefly the major theological achievement of the Second Vatican Council, I would unhesitatingly reply: the recovery of *tradition*. There are two inseparable aspects of this. On the one hand, there was the rediscovery, thanks to the careful historical labors of the 1940s and '50s, of rich veins of liturgical and ecclesial traditions antedating the "traditional Catholicism" of the post-Reformation church. On the other hand, there was the even more radical realization that tradition is as much process as content (*traditio* as well as *tradita*), and that this process is living, creative, and community-based. In the words of an often and deservedly quoted passage from the Constitution on Revelation (*Dei Verbum*): "... the church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes" (#8).

Perhaps the "Revolution" in theology launched by Vatican II had its equivalent of the storming of the Bastille on that November day of 1962 when some 60 percent of the Council Fathers voted against the proposed schema on revelation which had been prepared by the curia-dominated theological commission. In face of the obvious dissatisfaction of the bishops and despite the failure to achieve the mandated two-thirds negative vote, John XXIII in a dramatic intervention withdrew the draft and reconstituted the commission. (An exercise of papal supremacy which seems to have escaped the fulminations of Hans Küng.) From this act the real beginning of the Council might be dated; and from the refashioned commission came the marvelous little treatise on tradition which broke the theological strangle-hold of the "traditionalists." For it supplied the cutting edge of the revolutionary realization that "traditional Catholicism" was not Catholicism *tout court*. Indeed, when measured against the theological standard, embodied in the Catholic sense of tradition, post-Reformation Catholicism proved defective on more than one count.

Yet, as I have suggested, the immediate effect of the conciliar accomplishment was "destructive." It deprived Catholics of the language with which they had habitually ordered their religious universe and through which they had articulated their own self-understanding. It is no wonder that its loss created a wide-spread sense of anomie, a loss of personal and corporate religious identity. Though the trauma was probably unavoidable, we might, conceivably, have endured our dislocation and diminishment less convulsively, more gracefully, and with greater wisdom. Be that as it may, twenty years later we are searching for a new language with which to spell out to ourselves and others our identity. This search represents the "constructive" moment of the Council's achievement... and it has still barely begun.

Now no one will dispute that twenty years is a considerable portion of the life of an individual. And each can trace, in his or her own terms, my own trajectory in those years from youthful seminarian to middle-aged professor. But, whether the consideration consoles or not, twenty years are a minuscule period

in the life of church or culture. In my blacker moments, I regain some perspective by reflecting that two linguistic geniuses of the Protestant Reformation, Luther and Bach, were separated not by twenty but by two hundred years. Or, putting the matter more professorially, year after year I scan a new class of theologians, not in the expectation of espying a potential Thomas Aquinas or even Albert the Great, but in the hope of beholding a budding Peter Lombard. Even had we done all things faithfully and creatively, there is still no rushing the language.

Vatican II's deconstruction, therefore, has created a condition of linguistic deprivation, reducing many of us to an almost infantile state of stuttering (hopefully, one not completely removed from the Pauline "groanings" of *Romans* 8). And given the silence of our aphasia or, alternately, the farrago of our babblings, it is little wonder that a sympathetic but hard-nosed analyst like McSweeney would conclude from his investigation of post-Vatican II Roman Catholic theology: "In the new theology there are no compelling theological grounds for becoming a Roman Catholic." The sociologist's challenge to the theologian is straightforward, and it deserves a straightforward reply. Twenty years after the Council, then, the theological prospect must be founded upon a personal response to the query: why am I a Roman Catholic?

IF THE COUNCIL showed that the traditional language of post-Reformation Catholicism was not the unique way of articulating Catholic consciousness, then one might legitimately draw the inference that there is a deeper stratum of the language—a "depth grammar," if you will—which underlies and generates successive and always partially adequate empirical forms. It is this depth structure which distinguishes the Catholic experience and expression of the world. If I am not mistaken, David Tracy alludes to this when he speaks of the Catholic "analogical imagination." However one signifies it, it forms the basis both for personal commitment to Catholicism and for the elaboration of an adequate Catholic theology in every era.

Let me attempt to elucidate this foundational reality by referring to the Catholic "sacramental consciousness." It is the conviction, in the words of Hopkins, that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God." This sacramental consciousness is centered upon the fact of Incarnation, and radiates forth to touch and transform the whole of created reality. It is the "Beatrician experience," incomparably poeticized by Dante, whose creative recovery marks every period of true reform in the church. At the same time it is Eliot's "hint half guessed, gift half understood" which must ever and again be reappropriated and probed more deeply.

The concrete expression of this sacramental consciousness can be multiform, and can certainly be more or less full and faithful. But it seems to me to be normatively governed by certain foundational sensitivities—keeping with our linguistic model, call them "grammatical rules." Thus the language which brings Catholic sacramental consciousness to expression must exhibit or, at least, be open to the corporeal, the

communal, the universal, the cosmic, and the transformational. Anything less fails of catholicity. A brief comment on each of these traits seems called for.

Any expression of authentic Catholic consciousness must be characterized by sensitivity to and appreciation for human bodily reality. It is body which sacramentalizes spirit, just as language gives body to consciousness. Any depreciation of body, whatever it may call itself, does not represent Catholic consciousness, though it may indeed express very well the depth grammar of some alternative linguistic system, say that of Manicheism or Jansenism. The post-Vatican II church has made a significant empirical recovery in this respect by incorporating into its sacramental ritual a renewed stress on that most fundamental of bodily senses: touch. The imposition of hands, not only in the rite of ordination, but in those of anointing, reconciliation, and even eucharistic celebration, represents a linguistic recovery of prime importance.

A second characteristic element of Catholic consciousness and language is its communal dimension. Catholic language is, irreducibly, "we-language." It rejects any suggestion that the foundational religious datum is the individual alone before God, by the contrary proposition that we never stand alone before God. For it is precisely *we* who stand before God. Hence the community is matrix and mediatrix of the Catholic sacramental consciousness. And, even at the height of contemplative awareness (which the Catholic tradition definitely fosters) the language remains plural. Dante's great vision of the Trinity is, inseparably, a vision of redeemed humanity.

A third feature of Catholic consciousness and language is its universal extension. By this I mean that the scope of the Catholic linguistic universe is unrestricted. It addresses both the private and the public, the natural and the cultural, the personal and the institutional. It can legitimately articulate the concerns of "liberation theology" and "right to life movements." Indeed it suggests that a significant bond may unite them: the bond of sacramental consciousness. At its depth Catholic consciousness recognizes and gives voice to the possibilities and pitfalls in every contingent cultural expression, just as it appreciates that humankind both bears and distorts the divine image.

One aspect of this universality merits special mention. Catholic consciousness and language integrates both life and death in a reciprocal exegesis which counteracts the fatal human tendency to deny death and snatch at life. Catholic

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sacramental language proclaims "the death of the Lord until he comes;" so that those schooled in this language may learn, in Charles Williams's telling phrase, "to die each other's life, live each other's death," since all have died in Christ and now live in him.

A fourth characteristic of Catholic consciousness and language is its cosmic thrust. Here again I do not deny that particular expressions may at times have fallen short of the integral Catholic vision; but these are to be judged and corrected in accordance with its primary and privileged symbols. Here the Easter Vigil celebration is paradigmatic. For on this first of sabbaths the whole of the created universe is co-involved in Christ's redemption and serves as the hallowed environment for the baptismal death and re-birth of new believers. What follows as consequence upon this is the tremendous responsibility incumbent upon believers to be and become those children of God, for whose appearing, according to *Romans 8*, the whole of the created universe groans in expectation. The fate of the earth is entrusted to humankind; and this incarnational responsibility finds an ultimate ground in Catholic sacramental consciousness.

A final trait of Catholic consciousness and language is its transformational sensitivity. There is a radically processive strain to Catholic tradition with its insistence upon growth into Christ, transformation from glory to glory, and final transfiguration. Deeply congruent with this Catholic concern is the distinctive importance given to the figure of the saint in Catholic imagination and performance. Again, there are ample instances of abuse. But the genuine insight does not aim so much to place upon a pedestal as to sacramentalize a common vocation and destiny. The communion of saints embodies and expresses a distinctively Catholic sense that our common journey to God, our *itinerarium in Deum*, finds direction and support in the lives and witness of those in whom the fire and rose have become one. In the process the very self is transformed.

WHY, THEN, am I a Catholic Christian? Because the Catholic tradition is the bearer of a singular grace: that of a comprehensive language which combats our subtle and not so subtle tendencies to partiality, to the erection of our immediate and often distorted experiences into the measure of the whole. Authentically Catholic language seeks to promote and sustain the creative tension of "both/and" rather than succumb to the easier, but often reductionist, language of "either/or." At the same time the comprehensiveness of Catholic language is not indiscriminate nor slovenly syncretistic. For its ongoing point of reference is the Word whose classic and normative expression is incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Twenty years after the Council, the sociologist throws down the gauntlet to the theologian (with however much academic propriety): Is it, in any identifiable sense, Roman Catholicism which is being reconstructed in the wake of Vatican II? And linked with that: Are there any compelling theological reasons to become a Roman Catholic today? As a Catholic theologian my task might be likened to that of the grammarian who seeks

to display the depth structure of the language of Catholic tradition, both to offer criteria for evaluating the adequacy of any given reconstruction and to suggest the rich possibilities of creative expression the language can provide. But this remains, admittedly, only a partial reply, and outlines a still rather abstract prospect.

Hence, as a Catholic Christian, my earnest hope in this post-Vatican II time of peril and promise, of deconstruction and reconstruction, is for the emergence of genuine Catholic poets who can draw forth from the springs of sacramental consciousness things both old and new and articulate them in

language and symbols apt for our day. Indeed both the Catholic and human prospects may depend upon such poets. For the close of his careful and critical examination of the bankruptcy of moral discourse in the West, Alasdair MacIntyre suggests: "We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict" (*After Virtue*). It is a striking conclusion and a striking symbol. Benedict—theologian, sociologist, poet, saint—symbolizes well the magnitude of reconstruction and the cost of discipleship which we are beginning to fathom twenty years after the start of Vatican II.