

EDITOR'S NOTE

Bishop Thomas presented this homily on June 7, 2016, during the closing liturgy at the annual Catholic Health Assembly in Orlando, Florida.

Vatican II's Light Continues to Shine

By MOST REV. GEORGE LEO THOMAS, PhD

On Oct. 28, 1958, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli emerged onto the world stage and chose the name John XXIII. Corpulent, informal and given to spontaneous conversation, Pope John XXIII stood in stark contrast to his predecessor, the slender, dignified and circumspect Pope Pius XII.

Self-anointed prophets considered Pope John XXIII a compromise candidate. They predicted that this aging Cardinal of Venice would be a caretaker pope, an innocuous leader and a transition to a more stable and effective papacy. They were unprepared for the seismic waves that followed his election, most especially when Pope John announced his intention to convene a worldwide ecumenical council.

Georgetown University Professor John O'Malley, SJ, reported that the "extraordinary popularity of Pope John XXIII among Catholics and non-Catholics alike excited worldwide interest in 'Pope John's Council.'" *Time Magazine* named John the "Man of the Year" in 1962, gracing the magazine cover with his smiling and benign visage.

In the years surrounding the great council, Pope John used the Italian word *aggiornamento* to describe the essential reason why he convened the council. *Aggiornamento*, Italian for updating or modernizing, gave the council "a special character and imbued it with a special force."² *Aggiornamento*, in layman's terms, meant opening the windows of the church and letting fresh air pour in, and, equally important, allowing the light of the Holy Spirit to stream out through its doors and windows.

During those years, the council fathers produced four constitutions, nine decrees and three declarations, all differing not only in rank but also

in importance. Among all the documents, the late Cardinal Avery Dulles considered the Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, as the council's "most momentous achievement." *Lumen Gentium* reflects and magnifies the power of the Gospel, and in particular Christ's mandate that we must "place our light on a lamp stand and let it shine before others, so they may see our good deeds and glorify our heavenly Father."³

Fifty years in the life of the church is a very short time, and the vision and values of the council continue to unfold before us. At the close of the council, the Archbishop of Baltimore, Cardinal Lawrence Shehan, wisely observed, "The Council has ended; the Council has just begun."

In light of today's Gospel, and against the backdrop of *Lumen Gentium* and other council documents, I will describe seven beams of light that emanate from the Second Vatican Council. You may wish to add your own. These beams of light hold the potential to renew, recharge and reinvigorate the life of our respective dioceses, parishes and institutions.

THE UNIVERSAL CALL TO HOLINESS

In pre-conciliar times, the call to holiness was associated largely with clergy and religious, unintentionally relegating the laity to the sidelines of the spiritual life. The council fathers underscored the dignity of the baptized. "All Christians, in any state or walk of life, are called to the fullness of the

Christian life and the perfection of charity.”⁴ The council’s vision is clear and compelling. All of us are adopted daughters and sons of the Lord, all fashioned in the image and likeness of God. This is our shared destiny, and our common spiritual DNA. All of us are invited by the Lord himself to walk in his company as children of light until we reach our heavenly homeland. This is why the early church fathers called the Sacrament of Baptism the sacrament of enlightenment.

LITURGICAL RENEWAL

In the days following the council, the most obvious and apparent change experienced by ordinary Catholics was the introduction of the vernacular into the liturgy. But the more important value that came from the council fathers was their admonition that Christians should not be present at liturgy as strangers or silent spectators. Rather, they insisted on the “full, active, conscious participation” of the laity in the celebration of the liturgy.⁵ Beautifully prepared liturgy, prayerful song, strong homiletic preaching, sacred silence and the full panoply of liturgical ministries are the expectation and the gold standard to be present in every community across the globe. All activities of the church, her mission, ministry and apostolic life should flow from the liturgy and return to it as the “source and summit” of the life of the church.

THEOLOGY OF CONNECTIONS

A third beam of light that emanates from the council is the connection between liturgy and justice, worship and compassion, prayer and service, praise and mercy, or in Scriptural parlance, “love of God and love of neighbor.” The council fathers gave impetus to the emerging body of Catholic social teaching, which reached full flower in the pontificate of Pope John Paul II. The council fathers raised up the vision of the human person fashioned in the image and likeness of God, wherein each person has inherent value and innate dignity. In the years following the council, new concepts like solidarity, subsidiarity, the common good and a preferential option for the poor became the theological foundation for the charitable works of the church. So, too, is the church’s responsibility to help address the underlying causes of injustice that keep generations of people enslaved in poverty and need. This teaching is so central to the life of the church that Dorothy Day asserted, “God made heaven hinge on the

way we act towards him in his disguise of commonplace, frail, ordinary human beings.”⁶

COLLABORATION

A fourth beam of light is found in the council’s insistence on new ways of carrying out the saving mission of the church. New words and concepts like cooperation, collaboration, consultation, collegiality and shared responsibility came into focus in the years following the council. In pre-conciliar times, much of the heavy lifting was done by priests and sisters. The council introduced a more expansive role for the laity in the church, encouraging the baptized “to exercise their apostolate both in the Church and in the world, both in the spiritual and the temporal orders.”⁷

New structures follow the council, in particular, the creation of pastoral and finance councils, and the wide array of consultant bodies involving the laity. “Their activity is so necessary within church communities that without it, the apostolate of the pastor is generally unable to achieve its full effectiveness.” In the rapidly changing landscape of health care, we must see and welcome the ministry of the laity as a work of the spirit, a sign of *aggiornamento* and a blessing that flows from the heart of the council.⁸

RECONCILIATION

The church must be a place of mercy and forgiveness, a place of healing and the home of reconciliation. In every community and institution, in every parish and family, there are people who are wounded, hurt and angry. Forgiveness is at the heart of the Gospel. Pope John XXIII insisted the church should dispense the medicine of mercy generously and copiously, showing herself to be the “loving mother of all, benign, patient, forgiving and full of mercy.” This has been the constant *leitmotif* of Pope Francis, and a mandatum that flows from the heart of the Lord himself. To paraphrase William Shakespeare, “The quality of mercy falls like gentle rain from heaven. It is twice blessed, blessing the one who gives and the one who receives.” Reconciliation has the power to shed light in darkness, and to usher healing and hope into a world in need.

ECUMENICAL AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

In a rare moment of confluence, Pope Emeritus Benedict and German theologian Hans Kung both opined that there will be no peace among the



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nations until there is peace among the great religions. During the last 30 years, ecumenical and interfaith dialogue has taken a backseat across much of the globe. That sad reality is changing. Ours must become a church that intentionally cultivates respectful relationships among all peoples. Pope Francis is modeling for us the import and impact of respectful dialogue, shared prayer and common works of mercy. Pope Francis and the council fathers are of one mind when they envision a church that prefers dialogue over diatribe, invitation over invective and humility above hubris.

THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

The years following the council produced a considerable number of casualties, persons who, for a wide array of reasons, parted company with the Catholic family. The New Evangelization engages all the baptized, beginning in our own families and circle of friends, to invite people to come home, to tell them that the parish family is incomplete without them. In recent years, there has been a dangerous ecclesiology at play, a para-

digm that espouses a “fewer but purer” mentality. Pope Francis has challenged that premise directly. “The Church,” he says, “is the home of all, not a small chapel that can hold only a small group of selected people. You must not reduce the bosom of the universal church to a nest of protecting our mediocrity.”⁹

We must never grow weary of inviting others to know Christ, and to see that the doors of the church are open in welcome and warm embrace. Awakening the sleeping giant of the laity, and helping each person embrace his or her role as evangelizer, unlocks a great door of opportunity. The late Pope John Paul II stated powerfully, “No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church, can avoid the supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples.”¹⁰ The Gospel says it well — we must let our light shine for all to see.

Just over 50 years ago, the Second Vatican Council was brought to a formal close and a new beginning. It is good to examine meaningfully and deeply the quality of our own commitment to the vision, the values and the *aggiornamento* proclaimed by the fathers of the council. They have articulated a rich and exciting vision, with power to strengthen our personal relationship with Christ and to renew the spiritual lives of parish, diocese and institution.

In the life of the church, 50 years is a very short time. The real work of the council has just begun.

MOST REV. GEORGE LEO THOMAS is bishop of the diocese of Helena, Montana.

NOTES

1. John O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2010) 34.
2. O'Malley, 38.
3. Matthew 5:15-16.
4. Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium* 40, para. 2.
5. Paul VI, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 14.
6. Dorothy Day, “Room for Christ,” *The Catholic Worker*, December 1945.
7. Paul VI, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 5.
8. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 10.
9. Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God: The Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis,” *America*, Sept. 30, 2013.
10. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 3, para. 4.

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