

VATICAN II: PROMISE & REALITY

The Catholic Church in the United States
Twenty-five Years After Vatican II
A statement issued on September 20, 1990

THE FELLOWSHIP AND THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

From its earliest days the Fellowship has rarely made public statements, only three to be exact—on Catholic Higher Education, on Sexual Morality, and on the priestly ordination of women. What prompts the present statement is the issuance of a variety of recent declarations by academics in Europe and in the United States highly critical of the implementation of Vatican II as conducted by the Holy See, particularly during the pontificate of the present pope.

The Board of Directors of the Fellowship views the policies of both Paul VI and John Paul II as both appropriate and as authentic interpretations of what the Council Fathers intended and incorporated into the sixteen documents of Vatican II.

When the Fellowship came into existence in 1977 as an interdisciplinary body dedicated to the service of the Catholic faith, only two dozen scholars attended the first meeting in St. Louis under the sponsorship of John Cardinal Carberry. Today almost one thousand members from a variety of academic and pastoral fields remain dedicated to what was decided then as our fundamental reason for existence:

We wish to form a fellowship of Catholic scholars open to the work of the Holy Spirit within the Church. Thus we wholeheartedly accept and support the renewal of the Church of Christ undertaken by Pope John XXIII shaped by Vatican II and carried on by succeeding pontiffs.

We accept as the rule of our life and thought the entire faith of the Catholic Church. This we see not merely in solemn definitions but in the ordinary teaching of the Pope and those bishops in union with him, and also embodied in those modes of worship and ways of Christian life and practice, of the present as of the past, which have

been in harmony with the teaching of St. Peter's successors in the See of Rome.

I. Introduction

When Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council on October 11, 1962, he identified the principal task of the Council as that of protecting and expounding, in a more effective manner, the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine. More than once in his opening speech, the pontiff emphasized the need for total fidelity to the Church's doctrinal heritage, even as the Council and the whole Church sought to understand the revealed message more fully and deeply and to express it in forms more adapted to circumstances of the present day.[\(1\)](#)

In harmony with his previous statements announcing and convoking the Council, Pope John specified, also, as goals of the Council, the spiritual renewal of the Church, the promotion of Christian unity and the evangelization of that greater part of humanity not yet participating in "those sources of divine grace which exist in the Catholic Church."[\(2\)](#)

Whatever the differences that emerged among the bishops during the Council about how best to implement Pope John XXIII's grand design, and they were many, the assembled bishops knew themselves to be the successors of the Apostles in the Church founded by Jesus Christ. They understood that, above all others in the Church, they were duty-bound to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it had developed in the Spirit-guided Tradition of the Church and to organize, perhaps better than they were doing in 1962, their ministries of evangelization and reconciliation. The secular world, the non-Catholic world, even some Catholics may have looked for a radical change in Catholic claims, creeds, and conduct; but uppermost in the minds of the Council Fathers, including Pope John XXIII, it is clear, was the updating and renewal of the Catholic apostolic effort in a line of faithful continuity with the past.[\(3\)](#)

This latter consideration is an important one because in these twenty-five years since the Council, some Catholic thinkers have cited Vatican II as providing a basis for Catholics -- whether laity, clergy or religious -- to dissent from binding Catholic teachings in the doctrinal or the moral order and as a basis to depart from the discipline of the Church as represented today in its liturgical books and in the revised Code of Canon Law for the

Latin Church, a project John XXIII himself had identified, in announcing the Council (January 25, 1959), as one of its hoped-for proximate results.[\(4\)](#)

The Council, it is evident, diligently pursued the goals specified by Pope John XXIII through four sessions over a more than three-year period. It issued sixteen documents presenting its teaching. These documents of Vatican II deserve a periodic and careful re-reading as we seek to preserve and enhance the authentic heritage of the Council in the decades ahead.

II. The American Catholic Tradition

Given the passage of twenty-five years since the Council's close, it is fitting that an effort be made to assess the overall impact of that Council on the life and practice of the Church in the United States. We limit our review to the life of the Church on our own shores because, as members of an overwhelmingly American association, we of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars know this Church best.

We begin our evaluation in the realization that the short history of the Catholic Church in the United States has been a remarkable American success story by itself, given the country's indigenous Protestantism and emphasis on material progress. It has also been a unique phenomenon within the universal Catholic community, singled out for special praise by all modern popes, especially by Pius XI, Pius XII and by John XXIII himself. In spite of the social obstacles placed in their way, Catholic bishops from the earliest days of this republic fashioned a Church which by the twentieth century had become the largest single religious body in the country.

In one generation, also, from the beginning of World War II (1939) to the opening of Vatican II (1962), the Catholic population, according to the *Catholic Directory*, doubled from 20 to 40 million; the number of priests grew from 25,000 to 50,000, while women religious tripled in the same period from 50,000 to 150,000. Approximately seventy-five per cent of all Catholics attended Mass every Sunday.[\(5\)](#) Over two-thirds of all Catholics accepted the Church's teaching on marriage, including that on contraception.[\(6\)](#) One out of every seven American children attended a Catholic school.

The Catholic school system, from kindergarten to university, was the largest of its kind, not only in America, but in the entire Catholic world,

devoted among other things to the authentic transmission of the Church's faith. And the upwardly mobile Catholic population, in spite of their predominantly immigrant roots, had by the Council's opening surpassed the socio-economic achievement of their Protestant neighbors. The presence of a Catholic president in the White House was not as significant for the Church as the rising incidence of practicing Catholics in banking, industry, trade unions, the military, the professions and in the academic and political world.

If Catholic leaders or the faithful in general gave thought in 1962 to the impact of the upcoming Council on Church life in the United States, and it is not clear how many gave such thought, surely they hoped for a strengthened, reformed and revitalized, united and dynamic Church, a more faithful and devout people witnessing Christ to the world and accomplishing in an ever more effective manner Christ's Great Commission to evangelize all nations.

Ironically, this was not, in the main, to be the case, at least not in the short run. The Council articulated a hugely successful and welcome updating of the Church's self-understanding and called for a multiplicity of reforms in various dimensions of ecclesial life. These have faithfully and, in the main, successfully been implemented. But nobody was really prepared for the multitude of dysfunctions, which, whatever their causes, accompanied the effort to assimilate the Council's teaching and implement its reforms.

Was anyone expecting, in 1962, the mass exodus from the religious life and the significant departure of priests from the active ministry that came in the post-Council years? Was the rejection by certain scholars, and by those whom they influenced, of a variety of binding Catholic teachings anticipated? Did anyone foresee the depopulation of the seminaries and the still-continuing decline in priestly vocations? Was it forecast that a high percentage of Catholics would, within twenty-five years, be more or less indistinguishable from other Americans in adhering to relativistic religious and ethical concepts? Or that they would be in irregular marital situations because they had entered a civil marriage or just lived together or married, without dispensation, before a non-Catholic minister or, in so many cases, had divorced and invalidly re-married? Did we expect to lose a generation of young people who had received inadequate, confuse or contradictory religious instruction? Did we suppose that, within twenty-five years, Mass attendance would be at an all-time low? Practicing Catholics in 1962, we think, would have regarded these developments unbelievable and catastrophic.

Some scholars, first in Western Europe and then in the United States, interpreted the massive doctrinal dissent and the exodus of clergy and religious (not confined to the United States) following Vatican II positively as a by-product of the needed radical transformation of the institutional Church mandated in their reading of Vatican II. The Church was now emerging, it was maintained, variously, from a classical, Constantinian, medieval, patriarchal or Counter-Reformation age. The late theologian Philippe Delhaye, a one-time president of the International Theological Commission, has characterized these thinkers and their positions as a "Meta-Council" [\(7\)](#) built on opinions having no basis in Vatican II or extending its teaching beyond the manifest intention of the authors or arbitrarily interpreting the meaning of its texts, thus generating a total rupture between Vatican II and all other previous councils and ages of the Church. Defenders of a radical transformation also built their case on the results of selected contemporary scientific studies of biblical and other historical sources. These welcome and manifold studies require careful evaluation. However, the Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops endorses Msgr. Delhaye's view:

"It is not licit to separate the pastoral character from the doctrinal vigor of the (Vatican II) documents. In the same way it is not legitimate to separate the spirit and the letter of the Council. Moreover, the Council must be understood in continuity with the great tradition of the Church."[\(8\)](#)

In spite of the confusion, doubts and divisiveness generated by the developments mentioned above -- a stark contrast to the fidelity and unity exhibited by U.S. Catholics in the first six decades of this century -- millions of Catholics here continue to practice their faith with intense piety. Hundreds of thousands of apostolic-minded men and women, laity as well as clergy and religious, still make the Church their whole life and contribute significantly to its on-going vitality and success. Given, however, the many areas of weakness in the contemporary Church, we believe that both the solid accomplishments of Vatican II, enthusiastically received and vigorously implemented in the United States, and the dysfunctions outlined must be weighed together for a balanced assessment of our Church in the first quarter century of the post-Conciliar period.

III. Two Current Evaluations of the Period since Vatican II

The contemporary Church in the United States, one group of scholars tells us, is "healthy and vital," largely because our people have embraced the renewal set in motion by Vatican II, represented especially by the vernacular liturgy, the burgeoning lay ministries, the new consultative structures of church government, the generally good relations between bishops and theologians -- collaboration between bishops and theologians and other scholars being the rule rather than the exception -- and the strong emphasis on evangelization and on the promotion of Christian unity.⁽⁹⁾ This evaluation, although generally true, remains skeletal in respect to an assessment of the overall spiritual health of the Church in this country at this time.

Another insufficiently nuanced appraisal of the U.S. Church twenty-five years after Vatican II emerges intermittently from various staff persons of the NCCB/USCC. They usually cite as evidence of great progress and spiritual health the reformed liturgy, ecumenism and inter-faith activity, lay ministries, the important pastoral letters on peace and on the economy drafted after wide public consultation, the open consensus-building of the bishops themselves and the healthy relationship that now exists between the U.S. hierarchy and the Holy See.⁽¹⁰⁾ Again, these observations are generally true but selective and often obscuring of deeper problems that exist even in the cited areas of progress.

When the U.S. archbishops met with Pope John Paul II and the heads of the Roman dicasteries in March 1989, the U.S. representatives also laid emphasis on affirmative aspects of developments in the dioceses of the United States over the past quarter century. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, giving a synthesis of the discussion on the last day of the special meeting, identified in a most discreet fashion areas where some tension with the Holy See still remained. These included relationships with women religious holding diverse concepts of the religious life; procedures for the First Confession of children, inclusive liturgical language, altar girls, the conditions for general absolution, the expected pontifical document on Catholic higher education, seminary curricula, priestly vocations and priestly celibacy.

Cardinal John O'Connor spoke more specifically and at considerable length during that meeting in identifying the causes of the post-Conciliar controversy and malaise. In his judgment, these included the manner of preparing for, the long waiting for and the variety of interpretations given to *Humanae Vitae*; inadequate, ambiguous or false presentations of Catholic doctrine given by some teachers on a variety of levels in the Church; the failure of bishops to act against manifest error, various

mistaken philosophies permeating American culture; and a false concept of pluralism applied to Church doctrine.[\(11\)](#)

The Cardinals of the Holy See, on the other hand, spoke in a critical but friendly manner about what they perceived as the tendency of U.S. bishops to become moderators of theological differences based on a concept of doctrinal, as distinguished from theological, pluralism, rather than to act as witnesses to binding truth; about the drift of religious orders away from the appropriate supervision of bishops; about the presence of proponents of artificial contraception and other doctrinal errors in diocesan programs relating to marriage and marriage preparation; about the violation of liturgical norms; about the inadequate Catholicity of many Catholic colleges; and about the failure of some U.S. marriage tribunals to observe various requirements of Canon Law in issuing decrees of nullity.

IV. The Fellowship's Estimate

The Fellowship of Catholic Scholars, whose membership is interdisciplinary and situated in major secular and Church-related universities, wishes to present several observations parallel to those already mentioned, of which two are especially important for any assessment of the present state of the Church; one pertains to the general religious observance of U.S. Catholics twenty-five years after the Council's close; the second traces major elements of disarray in the contemporary Church, described earlier, to trends in Catholic academic circles since 1965.

It is no secret that the Catholic Church in the United States prior to Vatican II had one of the highest rates of Sunday Mass attendance in the Catholic world, certainly the highest among what would be considered secularized democratic societies -- upwards of 70 per cent on a regular basis.[\(12\)](#)

At the beginning of World War II when our population was twenty million, fourteen million Catholics attended Sunday Mass regularly. On the eve of Vatican II (1960), with the Catholic population now doubled, our regular church-goers kept pace -- 28 million. The Council had scarcely receded into history (1970's) when pollsters began to speak of a decline in Mass attendance to a little over fifty per cent, under 28 million, although Catholics by then numbered fifty million.[\(13\)](#) Today, in 1990, with the Catholic body now said to approximate 57 million, some Church

spokespersons still allege that Sunday Mass attendance has stabilized at the 1970 rates.[\(14\)](#)

By the late 1980's, however, pastors in populous areas began speaking of a lower average rate, a rate of twenty-five per cent. Press accounts out of Chicago have used the same number.[\(15\)](#) The New York Archdiocesan Office of Pastoral Research recently estimated that only 458,000 (twenty-two per cent) out of a current 2,205,000 Catholics attended Mass regularly.[\(16\)](#) This trend deserves to be watched with great care, because a twenty-five per cent rate, if widespread, and active pastors insist this is a realistic figure, represents a move toward a Sunday Mass attendance of 14 million, the lowest number in fifty years, and the lowest rate in a century of American Catholic experience.

It is no accident that, concomitant with this decrease in attendance at Sunday Mass, there has been an increase in the numbers of American Catholics whose views on sexual morality, abortion, divorce and remarriage, etc., in no way differ from their secular counterparts in the United States. While many more Catholics today may be college educated, a large number have been poorly catechized and instructed in the essentials of the faith.

Few defenders of the overall health of the post-Vatican II renewal here could be happy with these facts, although some appear to accept with equanimity the current higher rates of dissent from important Church doctrinal and moral teachings. These latter commentators do not give evidence of having reflected on the likely connection between the one and the other. Church leaders speak openly today about their diocesan financial problems, but little about what may be their fundamental cause: the significant drop in attendance at parish Masses, especially by the prosperous young middle-aged (not to mention youth and young adults) who are the products of a catechesis that frequently relativized the obligation to worship on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation and failed to speak of the obligation to support the Church.

What caused this decline in regular worship and the broader alienation and indifference associated with it?

The Council certainly did not initiate this downward movement. The authentic implementation of the Council has greatly enriched the life of the Church in the United States. Extra-Conciliar forces (the "Meta-Council"), however, drawn mainly from the Church academic world, disseminating a multitude of unacceptable theories, we believe, contributed substantially to this general weakening of the Church. This

phenomenon began with rejection of the teaching on artificial contraception and spread over a period of time to virtually all other sexual norms, now presented by some as ideals or precepts admitting of exception. The proportionalist theory of morality, which denies the existence of exceptionless moral norms, has gained wide acceptance among U.S. moral theologians; and its influence can be seen in a variety of texts and pamphlets. Though not intended by its supporters to promote relativism in moral standards, the theory can easily be turned to this purpose.

Some biblical critics have raised serious questions about the factual basis not only of the Church's claim to be directly willed and instituted by Christ but also about Christ's own claim to be the Eternal Son of God become man. They have questioned whether the apostolic ministerial succession of bishops has any basis in the apostolic Church.

Some theologians have questioned the defined dogmas of the Eucharistic Sacrifice and of transubstantiation, leading the faithful to conclude that the Eucharist is a reality significantly other than what was presented in the catechesis of the centuries up to now. Other theologians have questioned the uniqueness of the Catholic Church, the urgent mission to preach the Gospel to non-Christians, the doctrine of the ministerial priesthood and the binding authority of the Church's teaching office apart from solemn definitions. Some have maintained, in contradiction to repeated declarations of the Church teaching office, that women can be ordained bishops and priests. These are but a few examples of binding teachings exposed to debate and doubt over the last twenty-five years.

Incompatible views, too, about the nature and conditions of the religious life have contributed to undermining the discipline and enthusiasm of those (religious) often charged with operating the Church's vast institutional network.

All these doctrinal controversies, we believe, have weakened the unity, vitality and dynamism of the Catholic Church in the United States.

In liturgy, an era of liturgical experimentations resulted, at times, in banal, free-wheeling liturgies that have had the effect of desacralizing liturgy in the minds of many clergy and laity. Pastoral procedures, too, thought to make the reception of certain sacraments more beneficial -- for example, the delaying of Confession far beyond the age of First Communion, general absolution as a common practice and the discouragement of devotional confessions -- contributed to the greatly lessened use of individual personal confession and absolution.

Under the impulse of updating religious orders, many communities on their own initiative abandoned religious life as defined by the Church. In this process, the renowned U.S. Catholic elementary and secondary school system was shattered, possibly beyond recovery.

Many Catholic institutions of higher education, under the title of renewal or urged, as they believed, by financial considerations, simply declared themselves free from oversight by the Church's teaching office and have survived this schism without censure. Some members of these faculties continue to insist on their freedom to teach in contradiction to binding doctrines or norms of the Church.

Although radical cultural changes in Western society -- the sexual revolution for one; the stress on personal freedom and the good life, for another -- during the latter 1960's and 1970's did not leave Catholics unaffected, the Church had faced and overcome hostile cultural influences before. Throughout the nineteenth century American bishops created what became time-tested supports of Catholic identity and successful methods of solidifying the faith commitment of their people.

After Vatican II these important elements of the Church's support system too often fell into the hands of those who judged them obsolete or in need of drastic revision. The many resignations of priests from the active ministry and the scandalous conduct of a few further contributed to the distrust and depreciation of the priesthood and of the religious life as well. All these developments, we believe, must be considered in explaining why, over a period of time, active affiliation with the worshipping community has seriously declined and, also, in presenting a balanced evaluation of the twenty-five years since Vatican II.

V. Chief Concerns of Some Catholic Scholars

What has been the reaction of Catholics to these disorders and dysfunctions in the Church? One segment of Catholic scholarly opinion continues to view them as the normal by-product of an ecumenical council and, in the long run, constructive for the pilgrim Church. From this perspective, what the present Church situation requires is continuing dialogue among the conflicting parties, or between the U.S. bishops and the Holy See, and the additional study of the ongoing points in controversy.

Although few would argue against dialogue and research on any element of Church teaching or discipline, it is not at all clear that, given the way both have been pursued up to now in the United States, either has really led to a common understanding, to better relationships or agreement about the binding doctrinal and moral norms and disciplinary policies that Church members must accept and observe. In our judgment, the reason for this is that too frequently the scholars chosen or approved for the official dialogue or the research tend to represent only one theological and/or ecclesiological school.

Early NCCB-sponsored studies on the priesthood (1970) and the first drafts of the pastoral on peace (1983), the economy (1984) and the place of women in the Church (1988) were flawed because among the scholars appointed to draft the pastoral were those already well known for their disagreement with a variety of Church teachings and norms. More than once bishops were urged to include on these drafting committees recognized scholars with different viewpoints, thereby insuring a critical interchange and preventing any one-sided view from being presented to the sponsors. This advice generally has not been heeded.[\(17\)](#)

Study and dialogue, however, are not the final answer to an institution's doctrinal disputes or policy problems. Such a method cannot finally distinguish between authentic and binding Catholic teachings and the theological rationale for those teachings, which at any particular time may be of greater or lesser cogency. Study and dialogue leave open-ended the ultimate resolution of basic doctrinal questions, which only the Church's teaching office can resolve, relying on its understanding of Scripture and Tradition, and the assistance of the Holy Spirit given to the Church's teaching office in the integral exercise of its mission.

As scholars, we are strongly convinced of the value of dialogue and research. We hold that liberty of theological (and every other kind of) research and publication must be scrupulously respected. But, in the context of a commitment to the Catholic faith, such liberty does not authorize a scholar to substitute his or her opinions (or a group's opinions) for the binding teaching of the Church and thus nullify that teaching. Such a concept of academic freedom in theology rests ultimately on a relativistic concept of truth and would transform the Church into a Tower of Babel. The undermining of the Church's norms for Christian sexual behavior is a good illustration of how this occurs. Despite all the evidence that contraception does not foster true marital love but, on the contrary, goes hand in hand with growing rates of abortion and divorce, the call for continuing dialogue on these matters has not diminished the hostility of many Catholics to the Church's received teaching. Indeed, the seemingly

open-ended dialogue on what the Church insists are absolute truths has convinced many Catholics, often those prominent in public life, that the American mores are an acceptable option for the "good" Catholic, even if they involve killing the unborn in massive numbers. It is the function of those who govern the Church to teach Catholics, whatever their opinions or practice, what makes for morally acceptable behavior and to correct them when they are thinking against their faith or doing evil. "Dialogue" must not become a device for undermining Catholic character.

On this subject there is a final point to consider: the noticeable tendency at various levels of the Church, not exclusively confined to the dissenting community itself, to downplay or deny the depth and extent of contradictory teaching going on in Catholic institutions; to overlook the toleration, sometimes approval, of self-styled but hardly legitimate theological pluralism, tendered even by some bishops; to ignore the determination of virulent dissenters to use these same institutions, especially universities and colleges, to overturn or dilute the force of magisterium's definitions or decrees; to suggest also that most, if not all, voices raised in defense of Catholic teaching or against doctrinal dissent originate in segments of the Church body which are fundamentalist in outlook, simplistic in matters theological or catechetical, lack scholarly credentials, or which poison the Church's atmosphere by their strident voices of complaint and alarm. Even when substantial denials of the Church's faith and moral norms are acknowledged, or at least recognized as a fact of contemporary ecclesial life, these same dissenting forces regularly insist that bishops may not or should not consult the so-called Roman school of theology, nor use episcopal authority in any way to stifle academic freedom or its public expression, even in matters which have been decided time and time again by the highest authorities of the Church, and whose continued contradiction under Church auspices debilitates the Catholic body.[\(18\)](#)

VI. Issues That Must Be Addressed in Order to Preserve and Enhance the Authentic Heritage of Vatican II

Some theologians judge as many immediate threats to continued authentic renewal in fidelity to Vatican II the following perceived or actual developments; danger to the conferences of bishops and local churches by a renewed centralizing and authoritarian tendency of the Holy See; the bypassing of local bishops and, at times, their humiliation by the Holy

See; the policy of appointing as bishops only those candidates who exhibit complete fidelity to the Church's authentic teaching and discipline, which, in some cases, certain theologians have declared doubtful or erroneous; issuance by the Holy See of important teaching statements prepared, it is alleged, without proper consultation or by staffs lacking competence for the task; a clamping down on the freedom of theological research; procedures followed in the investigation of theologians that are violative of fundamental human rights; opposition to the continued examination of the possibility of ordaining women as bishops and priests as indicated by the "signs of the times"; the ignoring of or the refusal to implement results of ecumenical dialogues aimed at restoring Christian unity.[\(19\)](#)

The Fellowship of Catholic Scholars does not agree that these issues are the chief issues of consequence to the post-Conciliar Church in the United States or that the very statement of some of them represents an objective reading of the facts. Since they are of concern to many scholars, however, they should be discussed; and we are ready to discuss them in an atmosphere of respectful dialogue.

More importantly, we think that our Church leaders and the rest of us should take a hard look at the widespread and serious decline among Catholics in active affiliation with the worshiping community; at the widespread ignorance among Catholics of the teaching and discipline of the Church; at the deterioration among Catholics in marital stability and in family life; at the slippage among Catholics into secular and relativistic mindsets; at the growing incidence among Catholics of divorce and invalid remarriage; at the radical decline of the Catholic elementary and secondary school system; at the continuing downturn in priestly and religious vocations; and at the inability of many Catholic colleges and universities adequately to support the faith, devotion and orthodoxy of the young men and women entrusted to their care. It is there, especially, that the respectful dialogue of all concerned should prepare for the resolute action of those empowered to decide.

We believe that, above all, the purpose of the Church is to promote personal holiness. This presume living faith in Christ and in his Church, in what the Church authoritatively teaches about life here and hereafter. It necessitates regular worship, the state of grace and the reconciliation of sinners through the Sacrament of Penance; it presumes a piety exhibited in personal prayer, frequent worthy reception of the sacraments and in an active concern for works of justice and charity. The preaching, the structures, the laws of the Church and the priorities of its leadership must

be geared to support and reinforce these characteristics of genuine discipleship.

If the unity of the Catholic faith is to be maintained, we believe that unity of discipline must be re-established within the Church. The early bishops of the U.S. Church understood the relationship between the two. At the turn of the nineteenth century the infant Church was "sadly hampered by the presence of priests who knew not how to obey and of the laity who were interpreting their share in Catholic life by non-Catholic Church systems." So wrote Church historian Peter Guilday about problems encountered by our country's first bishop, John Carroll (d. 1817).⁽²⁰⁾ A like disorder exists in many Church institutions today. Yet, the nineteenth-century bishops through the instrumentality of the Baltimore Councils and the legislation emanating from the Holy See, up to and including the 1917 Code of Canon Law, turned this sorry state of affairs around. Others of that period, besides Guilday, lived long enough to see the so-called American Church become a model of unity and piety for Churches everywhere.

The Church's teaching office today should take a lesson from this problem and its solution of more than a century ago. Courageous and wise leadership from diocesan bishops turned the tide then; it can turn the tide, we believe, now. When John Paul II promulgated the revised Code of Canon Law for the Latin Church (January 25, 1983), he stated that its dominant purpose was the restoration of Christian living. The prescribed "rules and norms of action," he indicated, were intended to institutionalize important doctrines of Vatican II; and he aimed that these canonical laws "be observed by their very nature" with the prayer that "what is commanded by the head may be obeyed by the body."⁽²¹⁾ But this has not happened.

Norms connected with the teaching of the faith, as well as the norms of discipline, are frequently violated in Catholic centers, even at high levels of the Church. In his first address to the U.S. hierarchy on American soil, John Paul II reminded bishops: "Our leadership will be effective only to the extent that our own discipline is genuine."⁽²²⁾ Yet it is discipline within the Church, even among those in Holy Orders, which has been significantly dissolved. Ideally, preaching and teaching, sacramental life especially, take precedence over law and discipline. But it is the lack of discipline -- the refusal to obey -- that has rendered ineffective the preaching, teaching and norms for worthy sacramental practice contained in such documents as *Humanae Vitae*, *Catechesi Tradendae*, *Dominicae Coenae*, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, and *Sapientia Christiana*. Will it also nullify the content of the Universal Catechism when this document is finally promulgated?

We wish here to support the concept of a universal catechism or compendium of doctrine as a most useful guide for the composition of catechisms intended for classroom instruction and as an important instrument of preserving and enhancing the heritage of Vatican II, which, as John XXIII stated, was convened mainly to protect and expound more effectively the doctrinal heritage of the Church. We believe that those charged with the composition of this catechism should take account of all criticisms that have been offered and make the effort to incorporate every suggestion that will truly strengthen the effectiveness of this instrument in the life of the Church.

We believe that much time is wasted these days worrying about the democratization of the Church, whether there is too much or too little, arguing about change as progress or about tradition as stifling the spirit of Vatican II. These issues do not identify the real problems of the Church.

Democracy is a mechanism. It cannot determine or define the word of God or how best to vivify human lives with its meaning. "Progress" may or may not mean change for the better; "tradition" can mean archaic structures; it can also mean "the wisdom of the saints." So-called democrats, once in power, often become autocrats for their own ideology. Alleged progressives, usually the initiators of change, can be primitive in proposing solutions for complicated problems. Defenders of the Catholic tradition -- popes and bishops being good examples -- are frequently described in the media as conservatives. Still it is they who must lead in finding ways of implementing the intentions of Vatican II correctly.

There is only one norm, we believe, by which to judge whether we are successfully implementing Vatican II in the United States; and it is the rule of truth and holiness. II John: 9-10 provides the norm, first laid down for the second generation of Christians (ca. 90 A.D.) in the face of heresy already present in the young Church:

"Anyone who is so 'progressive' that he does not remain rooted in the teaching of Christ does not possess God, while anyone who remains rooted in the teaching possesses the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you who does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house; do not even greet him, for whoever greets him shares in the evil he does."

NOTES

(1) See Pope John XXIII, Opening Speech to the Council, in *Sacrosanctum Oecumenicum Concilium Vaticanum: Constitutiones, Decreta, Declarationes*, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, MCMLXVI, p. 861ff. English translation in *The Documents of Vatican II*, edited by Walter M. Abbot, S.J. New York: America Press, 1966, p. 713ff.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 867ff; in the English translation, p. 717. See, also, Pope John's December 25, 1961, Apostolic Constitution *Humanae Salutis* convoking the Council, *ibid.*, p. 839ff.; in the English translation, p. 703ff. See, also, Pope John's Announcement of the Council, January 25, 1959, in *Council Daybook, Vatican II, Sessions 1 and 2*, edited by Floyd Anderson, Washington, DC, National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1965, pp. 1-2.

(3) See [footnote 1](#) above.

(4) See [footnote 2](#) above; *Council Daybook*, pp. 1-2.

(5) See George A. Kelly, *Catholics and the Practice of the Faith* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1946, pp. 61 and 92) reports 77% for the married, 88% for the single in 1944; Joseph B. Schuyler, *Northern Parish* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1960, p. 203), up to 80% in 1960; Gerhard Lenski, *The Religious Factor* (New York: Doubleday, p. 243), up to 86% for the Catholic educated, 71% for public educated; Andrew M. Greeley and Peter H. Rossi, *The Education of Catholic Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 86% for all Catholic educated, 73% for some Catholic, 64% for no Catholic schooling in a study done several years before publication; Rodney Stark and Charles Y. Glock, *Patterns of Religious Commitment*, Volume 1 (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1968), which reports 70%.

(6) Fr. Andrew Greeley, "Family Planning Among American Catholics," *Chicago Studies*, Spring 1963. Greeley hoped at the time to demolish "some favorite myths about Catholic family planning." He cites a Michigan study which reported 30% of Catholics using contraception, 22% of regular Church-goers.

(7) "Le Meta-Concile," by Philippe Delhaye, in *Esprit et Vie*, no. 39, 25 Septembre 1980, pp. 513-526.

(8) See *Origins*, volume 15, no. 27, December 19, 1985, pp. 445-446.

(9) See "Do Not Extinguish the Spirit," a statement prepared for approval by the members of the Catholic Theological Society at their 1990 convention, "addressing the kinds of issues raised by the Cologne Declaration, but also reflecting North American concerns" in an April 1990 mailing to the Society's membership.

(10) See *Origins*, volume 18, no. 41, March 23, 1989, and no. 42, March 30, 1989.

(11) *Ibid.* For Cardinal Bernardin, pp. 721-724; for Cardinal O'Connor, pp. 682-686. See *Origins*, September 24 and October 1, 1989, for American addresses to John Paul II.

(12) See [footnote 5](#).

(13) *The Gallup Report: Religion in America, 1935-1985*, reports 74% for 1958, 52% for 1978, p. 42. Actually, the New York archdiocese rate in 1968 was 53%, 805,000 out of a population of 1.5 million.

(14) See George Gallup, Jr., and Jim Castelli, *The American Catholic People* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), p. 26.

(15) *National Catholic Register* (June 19, 1988). In that year a spokesman for the Cincinnati archdiocese said that his 1978 count showed a 43% rate. A researcher for the New York archdiocese thought her figures were closer to Chicago's 25%.

(16) An unpublished account of New York's average Mass attendance 1984-1988 issued by the Office of Pastoral Research and Planning found its way into the *New York Daily News*, May 22, 1990. That same office reported that in 1966, when New York's Catholics numbered less than 1.5 million, 805,000 attended Sunday Mass. These declines were almost predictable. A 1971 study of 2,182 high school seniors in New York City done at St. John's University (published a year later by the St. John's University Press under the title *Catholics and the Practice of the Faith, 1967 and 1971*) showed that within that four-year period the Sunday Mass attendance for boys fell from 65% to 30%. This group, then 17-18 years old, are in 1990 approaching middle age.

(17) Cf. Patrick Riley, *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, April 1982.

(18) See the tenth draft of a paper prepared by the staff of the USCC (march 19, 1990) entitled "The Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop"; also address by Archbishop John May to the annual convention of the CTSA (*Origins*, June 22, 1989); the determination of Richard J. McCormick and Richard McBrien in *National Catholic Reporter*, May 4, 1990; also the reaffirmed dissent by the new president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Fr. Walter Principe (who rejected *Humanae Vitae* in 1968) in *The Ecumenist*, July-August 1987, and *The Catholic New Times*, January 21, 1990, in which he relativizes Catholic teaching, rejects Cardinal Ratzinger's responses, and attacks the newly proposed Profession of Faith; cf. a plethora of theologians condemning John Paul II's repressiveness in *The Church in Anguish* (Harper & Row) and the present pope's address to US Bishops in which he excluded the compatibility of dissent and the appellation "Good Catholic" (*Origins*, October 1, 1987) to those who do.

(19) Cf. "Do Not Extinguish the Spirit," [footnote 8](#) above.

(20) *History of the Councils of Baltimore* (MacMillan, 1932), p. 185.

(21) Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Sacrae Disciplinae Leges* (*passim*). The Latin text will be found in *Codex Juris Canonici* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983), pp. vii-xiv; and the English text is *Code of Canon Law, Latin-English Edition* (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), pp. xi-xvi.

(22) His "first address to the U.S. hierarchy on American soil," in Chicago, October 5, 1979. USCC's *Pilgrim of Peace* (1979), p. 114.