Conversation starters: Dialogue and deliberation during Vatican II

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Any Catholics over 50 are struggling with the realization that many younger Catholics, particularly seminarians and younger priests, do not share their sense of indebtedness to the Second Vatican Council. As one of those “over-50” Catholics, I am convinced that we overlook the influence of the council at our peril. The council’s enduring significance is not limited to the 16 documents it promulgated, however. There is much the church today can learn from a consideration of the actual conduct of the council.

Yves Congar, the great 20th-century Dominican ecclesiologist and a key theological consultant at Vatican II, believed that councils manifest a deeper reality fundamental to the church itself—conciliarity. In an essay that has been influential in postconciliar ecclesiology (“The Council as an Assembly and the Church as Essentially Conciliar”), Father Congar complained of the tendency to treat councils as mere juridical events. He insisted that councils were, in some sense, a representation of the entire church. They effected “a totalization of the memory of the church.” If he is correct, then the key ecclesial dynamics that were at work at the council ought also to be present in the life of our church today.

Every ecumenical council manifests or puts on display, to some extent, what the church really is. What happens at ecumenical councils is more than the writing, debate, revision and approval of documents. At an ecumenical council, saints and sinners, the learned and the ignorant gather together. They share their faith, voice their concerns, pray, argue, gossip, forge alliances and compromises, enter into political intrigue, rise above that intrigue to discern the movements of the Spirit, worry about preserving the great tradition in which their identity is rooted, seek to understand the demands of the present moment and hope for a better future.

That those who gather at a council carry lofty titles (pope, patriarch, cardinal, archbishop, bishop, religious superior, theologian) and wear somewhat unusual garb should not distract us from the fact that, at heart, they are brothers and sisters (women did play their part, however circumscribed it may have been) in the faith to all other Catholic Christians. Their deliberations represent, in a dramatic form, what the church is called to be.

Father Congar argued against the idea, floated by some during the preparations for Vatican II, that it might be possible to have “a council by writing.” In such a view, it would have been sufficient for the bishops to have drafts of documents mailed to them. They would then submit written comments and suggestions, after which an amended version would be returned to them for a final vote. Congar rejected such a proposal as an ecclesial sham. He insisted instead that it was necessary for the bishops to actually gather together to deliberate as an episcopal body on the needs and concerns of the church. He knew that there were crucial ecclesial dynamics that could come into play only if the bishops were allowed the opportunity for genuine deliberation and discernment. Consider three of those dynamics.

**Catholicity of Dialogue**

The first dynamic pertains to the catholicity of dialogue. Here I am using the term *catholic* in line with its etymological roots. The Greek word *katholikos* is derived from the root, *kat’ holou*, “pertaining to or oriented toward the whole.” Catholicity affirms the fundamental unity-in-diversity of the church. Ecclesial dialogue is *catholic* to the extent that it freely engages different perspectives and insights. During the four sessions of the council, bishops were introduced to other prelates from diverse countries and continents, who looked at key pastoral and theological issues from strikingly different perspectives. One of the more felicitous decisions of the council concerned the seating of bishops in the *aula* (the nave of St. Peter’s Basilica where the main meetings of the council were conducted). The bishops were seated in order according to episcopal seniority rather than by region. This created the circumstances in which an Italian bishop, for example, might sit next to a bishop from Africa.

This arrangement made possible a fruitful exchange of diverse perspectives and insights. Indeed, some of the most important work of the council was accomplished at the coffee bars (nicknamed after two Gospel characters, Bar-Jonah and Bar-Abbas) kept open behind the bleachers in the *aula*. Bishops, after struggling to stay awake during one mind-numbing Latin speech after another, found respite at these coffee bars and often engaged in frank conversation about a variety of topics. It was the sustained, face-to-face conversation and sharing of diverse experiences that opened episco-

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pal eyes to new possibilities. These conversations were further facilitated by informal gatherings of bishops like the 22 bishops who met regularly at the Domus Mariae hotel and were committed to encouraging a more wide-ranging deliberation than was possible within the aula. These bishops met weekly to discuss topics being considered by the council. They included among their number key representatives from the various episcopal conferences and served as a sort of clearing house for ideas and proposals, facilitating workable compromises on disputed topics. Council bishops also had opportunities to interact with theologians (periti) and non-Catholic observers, who offered their own remarks regarding the issues being considered by the council.

It was the many opportunities for discussion and debate, both formal and informal, that allowed the bishops to discern the impulse of the Spirit. Even the common prayer of the council deepened this catholicity of dialogue. Daily liturgies were celebrated on a rotating basis among the diverse liturgical traditions, East and West. Many council participants recorded in their journals and diaries the transformative impact of these celebrations as experiences of a church immeasurably richer in diversity than they had previously imagined.

The catholicity of dialogue evident at the council shines a harsh light on the situation of our church today. We seek to live our faith in a culture that has become increasingly uncivil. We too often encounter demonizing rhetoric on cable television, talk radio and in the blogosphere. Yet the council reminds us of the Christian obligation to respectful conversation with people whose views may differ markedly from our own. The conduct of the council teaches us that a precondition for genuine ecclesial discernment is the conviction that none of us individually has all the answers. We discover the guidance of the Spirit and penetrate the power and significance of God’s word through ecclesial conversation and the opportunity to interact with believers who offer us different insights, experiences and questions.

**Humble Learning**

A second dynamic evident at the council was the bishops’ commitment to humble learning. In the century before the council it had become common to divide the church into two parts: a teaching church (ecclesia docens) made up of the clergy and a learning church (ecclesia discens) consisting of
the laity. This way of imagining the church dangerously overlooked the fact that bishops do not have a monopoly on divine truth. They do not receive supernaturally infused knowledge at their episcopal ordination. It is not the case that a priest with a shaky understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity on the day before his episcopal ordination would suddenly be able to give learned lectures on the topic on the day after ordination! As St. Cyprian of Carthage sagely pointed out in the third century, bishops must themselves be learners before they can be teachers (Epistle 74, 10).

Historians of Vatican II will point out the remarkable willingness of so many of the council bishops to become students once again. It is easy to forget that a good number of bishops, then as now, found that their pastoral responsibilities made it difficult for them to keep up with current historical, biblical and theological scholarship. As the council proceeded, many bishops sought the expert input of some of the many distinguished theologians and ecumenical observers who were in Rome at the time. Many regularly attended evening lectures offered by leading theologians. Bishop Albino Luciani (the future Pope John Paul I) admitted, according to an article in The National Catholic Reporter (Oct. 4, 2002), that during the council he tried to spend each afternoon in his room studying. He explained, referring to the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, conducted by the Jesuits:

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Vatican II reminds us that we are all disciples of Jesus and, therefore, lifelong learners. This is as true for the pope as it is for children preparing for first Communion. Our pilgrim church does not so much possess the truth as it humbly lives into it, as it were, knowing full well that, this side of Jesus’ Second Coming, we shall not have the fullness of truth (“Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” No. 8). We are all baptized into a great school of discipleship from which none of us ever graduates. Christ, our teacher, showed impatience only toward those who were arrogant in their certitude.

Openness to the World

The final dynamic evident in the council’s deliberations was its openness to the world. Pope John XXIII himself set the tone for this openness. Many have wrongly accused Pope John of being a naïve optimist, a remarkable accusation on the face of it, when one considers that during World War I he had served as a medical stretcher bearer, tending to the
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About Your Professor

Howard Gray, S.J., is presently the Assistant to the President for Special Projects at Georgetown University. Prior to this position, he has served in a number of leadership positions within the Jesuit community, including Provincial Superior, Formation Director, Tertiary Director and Rector of university and formation houses. He has lectured nationally and internationally on Ignatian spirituality. His has written extensively on Ignatian spirituality, ministry and the apostolic mission of Jesuit high school and universities. He is a well-known director of Ignatian retreats in the USA, East Africa and East Asia. He earned a bachelor’s degree in English and classics, a licentiate in philosophy and a licentiate in sacred theology from Loyola University of Chicago, and a doctorate in English from the University of Wisconsin. Fr. Gray has received five honorary degrees, the Georgetown Bi-Centennial Medal, the Jesuit Volunteer Corps Award and the Xavier University’s Leadership Medallion. He served as the Vice President of the Major Superiors of Men from 1985-1988 and on the Papal Visitation of Seminaries in the U.S. from 1981-1987.
injured and maimed victims of that bloody conflict. Later, as
a church diplomat, he held ecclesiastical posts in such glob-
al hotspots as Bulgaria, Turkey and France.

Pope John knew well the evils present in the world, but
he was convinced that we must not exaggerate those evils
and succumb to a dark apocalypticism. In his many address-
es and homilies he evinced an attitude of
respectful yet critical engagement with the
world. In "Humanae Salutis," the apost-
tolic constitution with which he formally
convoked the council, the pope warned of
“distrustful souls” who “see only darkness
burdening the face of the earth.” And in his opening address
at the council, he noted the advice he sometimes received
from “prophets of gloom” who see “nothing but prevarica-
tion and ruin” in the world today.

Pope John XXIII was convinced that Christians must be
willing to read “the signs of the times” and enter into a more
constructive engagement with the world. Indeed the history
of the council can be read as a long struggle among the coun-
cil bishops to acquire a form of balanced engagement in
which the church could preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ
with a humble confidence, challenging the forces of hate and
greed even as it affirmed the signs of God’s reign already pre-
sent in the world. Over the course of the council the bishops
became convinced that the times demanded a church that
lived in vulnerable and open mission to the world, effecting a
transformation from within as leaven. The council thereby
turned its back on that preconciliar tendency to stand in
severe judgment of the world from some privileged
Olympian heights.

Here again the council’s conduct and attitude offer
insight for our modern church, for we still hear far too many
apocalyptic pronouncements regarding “a
culture of death” and a “toxic secularism.”
The council reminds us that we must not
yield in the face of evil, but neither can we
close our eyes to the signals of grace
always present where humans seek justice
and truth and ask the great questions about life’s meaning
and ultimate significance.

Over the next three years we will have ample opportunity
to celebrate the teaching of Vatican II as a breathtaking
achievement and summons for today’s church. Yet we should
never forget that the council, in its conduct and deliber-
ations, was a manifestation of the church in a dramatic and
intense form. As an event of the church, the council reminds
us that our church today must 1) continue to practice the
catholicity of dialogue, 2) maintain a commitment to humble
learning and inquiry and 3) sustain an openness to the world
in which we have been sent. If we are faithful to these tasks,
perhaps we can fulfill the hope of Pope John XXIII for an
ecclesial renewal that will restore “the simple and pure lines
that the face of the church of Jesus had at its birth.”