



A short series of thoughts on the impact of this historic, critically defining event of our Church not just for the 20th century, but for this new millennium as well Part 4

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This week, we turn our attention to some issues that did, in fact, generate the verbal fireworks at Vatican II that we mentioned last week. The fireworks invariably exploded when a proposition under consideration was perceived by some as so deviating from current practice or teaching, as to be “dangerous” or “illegitimate” or maybe even “heretical.” For our purposes here, we will examine briefly four of the more controversial issues which generated hotly contested debate.

- 1). The first issue debated at the Council, was the place of Latin in the liturgy. It occupied the Council for several weeks during the first session. The dilemma was: should the Council confirm the status quo or move beyond it with regard to the use of Latin in the Liturgy? The status quo for Latin had been fixed in stone since the Reformation when the Protestant Churches opted for the vernacular, the language of place, the mother tongue. The Council resolved the issue when it adopted the most basic principle on the Liturgy: the insistence on “the full and active participation of the whole assembly in the liturgical action.” That full, active participation in the liturgical action could only take place when the gathered assembly was hearing and speaking in its own native tongue. So, the use of Latin in liturgical celebrations was replaced by the vernacular, the mother tongue.
- 2). Few issues sparked more bitter controversy both inside the Council and outside, in the media, than the relationship of the Church to the Jews, and to other non-Christian religions. The sticking point with relationship to the Jews was the burning question of how responsible they were for the death of Jesus. For centuries, the Jews had been hated, marginalized and murdered in mass numbers because Christians accused them of deicide, which means “the killing of God.” The first draft of the “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” brought an end to that charge, when that phrase was no-where to be found. Furthermore, the sections of the document dealing especially with the Jews, other non-Christians and the Muslims were broadened and softened and a conciliatory tone was adopted. The document, in its final form, was finally approved by a vote of 2,221 to 88 and promulgated by *Pope Paul VI* on October 28, 1965.
- 3). The document, entitled the “Declaration on Religious Liberty,” traveled a similar difficult path. This document advocated the separation of Church and State, the insistence that every one has a right to worship according to one’s conscience, and the primacy it gave to conscience over obedience to external authority. This aroused fierce opposition because the decree seemed to contradict repeated condemnations of the separation of Church and state by previous popes. Those of us living here in the United States do not fully appreciate how radical this document sounded in other parts of the world. Recall that at the time of the Council, for example, Francisco Franco, leader of Spain, had an important voice in the appointment of Spanish bishops, a right that was not renounced until 1975! Since the Council and this document, every Pope we’ve had, including our current one, has proclaimed religious liberty as a fundamental human right.
- 4). Another issue that turned out to be very contentious was the relationship of the bishops to the papacy, as spelled out in the doctrine of collegiality, enunciated in the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.” The doctrine of collegiality is understood as: the bishops as a college (a collective group) have a responsibility, together with the Pope, for the universal Church, not just their individual dioceses. Some bishops at the Council opposed this teaching as an infringement on the prerogatives of the papacy. Those who favored collegiality found a basis for it in the New Testament, and their model was the Church of the first three to four centuries before the development of the papal monarchy which came about when the Holy Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Collegiality was an attempt to bring out of the past a better pattern for the exercise of authority in the Church. This was a very brief look at some serious issues that occupied the Council during the months it met in the years 1962 to 1965.

In the final two columns of this series, I will attempt to show how this Council and more of its pastoral decisions reached right down into the pews of our *Parish of St. Catherine of Siena and St. Agnes* and into the lives of us, the people who occupy those pews. I hope you will continue to read. Thanks.