Selected Lectures

Pope John XXIII: His Life and Legacy
by Charles E. Curran, STD
Oct. 18, 2007

A New Council? Reflections on the Future of the Church
by Richard R. Gaillardetz
April 3, 2008

Zen and the Prayer of 21st Century Catholics
by Robert Edward Kennedy, SJ
Oct. 8, 2008

The Future of the Catholic Church: Challenges in the New Millennium
by Richard P. McBrien, STD
March 6, 2009
St. Edward’s University created

**The Most Reverend John McCarthy Lecture Series on the Catholic Church in the 21st Century**

to honor the Most Reverend John McCarthy, who led the Diocese of Austin from 1985 to 2001, and to underscore the university’s commitment to its Catholic roots and Holy Cross heritage.

Held on campus at Jones Auditorium in the Robert and Pearle Ragsdale Center by the Center for Ethics and Leadership every spring and fall, the McCarthy Lecture Series brings Catholic religious and lay experts from around the country to discuss issues facing the Catholic Church in the 21st century.

The lectures are free and open to the public.

A sampling of four lectures from the series follows in these pages.
It is an honor and a privilege to be invited to give the Bishop John McCarthy Lecture here at St. Edward’s University in Austin. I first met John McCarthy when he was working with the late Monsignor George Higgins in Washington on social justice issues. Like so many others, we both learned much from our late friend George. In light of these common interests, my first thought was to address the issue of the social mission of the church in this lecture tonight. But then I thought about what seems to be the most significant contribution of Bishop McCarthy to the life of the Catholic Church in the United States. He prided himself on being a “Vatican II bishop.” In this light a more appropriate topic tonight is a reflection on the life and legacy of Pope John XXIII, who gave us Vatican II.

As a newly ordained student priest, I was in St. Peter’s Square on the late afternoon of Tuesday, Oct. 28, 1958, the third day of the conclave to elect a new pope. This was the fifth time that crowds had come to the square to see if the white smoke from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel would signal that a new pope had been elected. In the previous four times it was at first difficult to discern what was the color of the smoke. Even that late afternoon it was hard to discern whether the smoke was white or black, but the fact that other lights went on immediately after the smoke indicated that we had a new pope. It was early evening before the announcement was made from the balcony of St. Peter’s overlooking the huge square that the new pope was Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, who would be called John XXIII. The new pope came out to bless the crowd. To be honest, I was disappointed. Pius XII had been a thin, ascetic figure with a noble Roman nose who piously made the threefold sign of the cross over the crowd, lifting his eyes to heaven. John XXIII was a roly-poly man who before he even finished the blessing started waving to the crowd.

Legacy of Vatican II
Those more knowledgeable than I pointed out that this would be an interim and caretaker papacy. John was 76 years old. His papacy would be short and quite conventional. Yes, his papacy was short — he died less than five years later on June 3, 1963. But how wrong we all were.
John XXIII was not a caretaker pope. He gave us Vatican II, which has had such a tremendous influence on the life of the Catholic Church. Vatican II, which began in 1962 and lasted for four sessions ending in 1965, constitutes his legacy. The first section of this lecture will discuss the great contributions of Vatican II.

Two significant characteristics mark the pre–Vatican II Catholic Church — triumphalism from a theological perspective and classicism from a philosophical perspective. In the triumphalistic understanding, the Catholic Church is perfect, holy and without spot. In the theses of the theology I studied in Rome in the pre–Vatican II period, the Catholic Church is the kingdom of God founded by Jesus Christ on Peter and the Apostles. The church has all the answers. From the Reformation through the Enlightenment and into the twentieth century the Catholic Church condemned the religious, philosophical and political errors of the times.

Classicism is a philosophical perspective which emphasizes the eternal, the immutable and the unchanging. We have the truth. There is no need to change anything. Classicism is contrasted with historical consciousness and recognizes change and development with both continuity and discontinuity. Bernard Lonergan, the Canadian theologian who taught me in Rome in the pre–Vatican II period, rightly pointed out that the shift from classicism to historical consciousness explains what happened at Vatican II.

John’s opening speech to Vatican II on Oct. 11, 1962, explained his general approach to the council, but at that time neither he nor anyone else had any understanding of what the council would do or even how long it would take. Three points stand out. First, there were to be no condemnations. “The Church has always opposed these errors. Frequently she has condemned them with the greatest severity. Nowadays, however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations.”

Second, the purpose of the council was aggiornamento — bringing the church up to date. Note here the whole historical consciousness
aspect. “Illuminated by the light of this Council, the Church — we confidently trust — will become greater in spiritual riches and, gaining the strength of new energies therefrom, she will look to the future without fear. In fact, by bringing herself up to date where required and by the wise organization of mutual cooperation, the Church will make men, families, and peoples really turn their minds to heavenly things.

“(I)t is necessary first of all that the Church should never depart from the sacred patrimony of truth received from the Fathers. But at the same time she must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate.

“(T)he Christian, Catholic, and apostolic spirit of the whole world expects a step forward toward a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciousness in faithful and perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of the faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary, everything being measured in the forms and proportions of a magisterium which is predominantly pastoral in character.”

The third point was the strong disagreement with the “prophets of gloom.” “In the daily exercise of our pastoral office, we sometimes have to listen, much to our regret, to voices of persons who, though burning with zeal, are not endowed with too much sense of discretion or measure. In these modern times they can see nothing but prevarication and ruin; they say that our era, in comparison with past eras, is getting worse, and they behave as though they had learned nothing from history, which is, nonetheless, the teacher of life. They behave as though at the time of former councils everything was a full triumph for the Christian idea and life and for proper religious liberty. We feel we must disagree with these prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand.”

A brief summary of the significant documents of Vatican II shows the deep and significant changes brought about by the council without, however, changing the basic faith of the church. The Constitution on
the Sacred Liturgy emphasized the active participation of all in the liturgy based on the baptismal gift of the priesthood of all believers and illustrated in the use of the vernacular languages. The Word of God, the scripture, now plays a much greater role in the liturgy, bringing together the two aspects of Word and sacrament. Jesus is present not only in the bread and wine but also in the Word and in the community of the disciples gathered together around the Eucharistic table.

The Constitution on the Church taught that the church is the whole people of God and not just the hierarchy. All Christians by reason of their baptism are called to holiness. The church is a pilgrim church always in need of reform and never perfect.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World recognized the legitimate autonomy of all earthly realities. The church works together with all people of good will to bring about greater peace and justice in our world. The church is in dialogue with the modern world and thus at times can learn from the world and others.

The Declaration on Religious Liberty brought about a dramatic change by asserting religious freedom for all based on the dignity of the human person and the limits of democratic government. The earlier position denied religious liberty on the basis that error has no rights. The Decree on Ecumenism insisted on the role of dialogue with other Christians and not condemnations. The true church subsists in the Catholic Church. To this day there is still much controversy about the precise meaning of the council’s statement on this matter. With regard to Jews, the council repudiated any understanding that the Jewish people were guilty of deicide in the killing of Jesus. Likewise the council recognized the continuing role of the covenant with the Jewish people and did not claim that this covenant ceased to exist with the new covenant.

In his broader dealings with the world, John also applied his emphasis on dialogue. The Catholic Church has strongly opposed Marxism and communism in all its forms, but in his 1963 encyclical, “Pacem in Terris,” John XXIII cautiously broke with this approach. John distinguished between false philosophical teachings about human
origins and the universe and movements which have a direct bearing on social, cultural and economic issues even if these movements have their origin and inspiration in false tenets. As a result the encyclical claims “it can at times happen that meetings for the attainment of some practical results which previously seemed completely useless now are either actually useful or may be looked upon as profitable for the future” (par. 160). His call for peace based on truth, justice, love and freedom was well received in the modern world.

In addition, John’s personality greatly contributed to his reputation. He was a simple, holy, humble man who came across as everybody’s grandfather. Thus, for all these reasons, John XXIII was the most significant and important Catholic figure in the twentieth century. There is no doubt that for many of us Catholics he is a model, a hero and a saint.

Another Legacy
The second part of this lecture will develop another important reason why Pope John XXIII is a hero, a model and an exemplar for us Catholic Christians today. Many people today think of John XXIII as having from the very beginning a clear understanding of exactly what he wanted the council to do and to achieve. I disagree. I do not think that John had a clear idea at all of what the council would be when he called it. He did not have all the answers. John’s ultimate greatness was the fact that he grew. He was open, he listened, and he learned. And it is precisely in this way that he is truly a model for all of us Catholic Christians today.

Here I have to make a few scholarly disclaimers. I am not an historian. Others have studied Vatican II and the life of John XXIII in great depth and in a very scholarly manner. My approach is somewhat influenced by my own personal experience but also relies on the work of other scholars, especially a fascinating article by the French Jesuit theologian Robert Rouquette that appeared in the July–August 1963 issue of Études, the French Jesuit monthly publication of culture, art and theology.

Roncalli had been the papal nuncio in Paris from 1944 to 1953. Rouquette, as a well-known theologian and commentator on the French church, was acquainted with Roncalli and his work in France.
Rouquette also later covered the Second Vatican Council for *Études* and was a strong supporter of the changes brought about by Vatican II.

Rouquette’s 1963 article appeared just after the death of John XXIII in June 1963. Rouquette in that article worries about a cult of personality about John XXIII. There is the danger of making him a saint of heroic perfection and genius. John XXIII like all of us was a human being with human frailties and problems. He was not an angel. Yes, he was a holy and intelligent man who made an unparalleled contribution to the life of the Catholic Church, but he was not perfect.

Rouquette’s article is entitled “Le Mystère Roncalli.” The basic thesis of the article is there was nothing in what Rouquette saw in France in those nine years that indicated Roncalli was anything more than a conventional and conservative Catholic churchman. Rouquette reports that before the 1958 papal election he heard one French cardinal say that one thing for sure was that it will not be Roncalli. One of the best French bishops, remarkable for his intelligence and character, who unfortunately died too young, cried when he heard that Roncalli was elected pope. This background explains why Rouquette was happily surprised by what Roncalli did as pope, especially with regard to Vatican II.

A brief overview of Roncalli’s life also shows few signs of what he would do during the short five years of his papacy. He was born on Nov. 25, 1881, in Sotto il Monte, Bergamo, Italy, the third of thirteen children of pious Catholic parents. He studied for the priesthood, served in the army, earned a doctorate in theology and was ordained a priest in 1904 for the Diocese of Bergamo. He served as secretary to the bishop of Bergamo, taught in the seminary, published a few brief historical monographs, as well as a laudatory biography of his bishop, and worked with youth. In 1921, Pope Benedict XV named him director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Italy. In 1925, he was appointed apostolic visitor to Bulgaria and made an archbishop. Only 40,000 Latin Rite Catholics and 4,000 Eastern Rite Catholics lived in Bulgaria. Peter Hebblethwaite, in his biography of John XXIII, entitles this particular chapter “Ten Hard Years in Bulgaria.” Roncalli was blamed for poorly handling the marriage of the Orthodox King Boris of Bulgaria to the daughter of King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy. Boris, an Orthodox Christian, agreed with
Roncalli to marry her in a Catholic ceremony in Italy but then broke his promise and had a large public Orthodox wedding back in Bulgaria.

In 1934, Roncalli became the apostolic delegate to Turkey and Greece. Both of these countries had very few Catholics. In terms of the Vatican diplomatic corps this assignment was on the bottom rung, but Roncalli did make contacts with Muslim culture and also some relationships with the Orthodox Church. Since he had never attended the Ecclesiastical Academy where the top Vatican diplomats had been trained, Roncalli realized in his own words that he was a donkey and not a horse (Hebblethwaite 97). But in 1944, Pope Pius XII appointed Roncalli the apostolic nuncio to Paris, probably the most prestigious Vatican diplomatic post. But herein lies a story.

Pius XII wanted to send Archbishop Valerio Valeri as nuncio to Paris. Charles de Gaulle refused to accept him as the Vatican nuncio to the new French government because he had been nuncio to the collaborationist regime in Vichy. For months, the impasse continued and neither de Gaulle nor Pius XII budged. On Jan. 1, according to protocol, the papal nuncio, as the dean of the French diplomatic corps, was to present New Year’s greetings to the French head of state. If there were no Vatican nuncio, the next diplomat in line was the Russian ambassador, which from the perspective of Pius XII would have been a disaster. So Pius XII blinked! On Dec. 5, Roncalli received a telegram from the Vatican appointing him nuncio to Paris. Yes, Pius XII had lost his battle with de Gaulle, but he would snub de Gaulle by sending him one of the lowest ranking Vatican diplomats.

Hebblethwaite entitles the chapter on Roncalli’s time in Paris “Difficult Mission to Paris.” Roncalli proved himself quite adroit in his dealings with the French government, but he was less successful with regard to the French church as already indicated by Rouquette’s comments. Roncalli’s time in France corresponded with a rise of intellectual, theological and pastoral renewal of the French church. Cardinal Emmanuel Suhard of Paris and others recognized that the French working class was estranged from the church. France, which used to send missionaries all over the world, now was itself a mission country. The church needed to evangelize the de-Christianized populace and overcome the wall separating the church from the modern world.
Suhard’s writings attracted worldwide attention with the English translation of Growth or Decline? The Church Today going through five editions from Fides Publishers in the United States. The priest worker movement grew out of this approach as priests moved out of rectories and worked side by side with other workers in an attempt to evangelize the working class. On the theological front Jesuits, especially in Lyons and Dominicans, especially at the faculty of Le Saulchoir, were adopting more historically conscious theological methodologies and moving away from the pre–Vatican II neo-Scholasticism.

The reaction of the Vatican to these developments was quite negative, and Roncalli as nuncio was seen as the eyes and ears of the Vatican. Pope Pius XII was upset with the leading role played by Suhard in trying to shape the mission of the church throughout the world. Suhard himself never really trusted Roncalli. The strongest and most public Vatican action came with the 1950 encyclical “Humani Generis,” which condemned the “nouvelle théologie” that had been developing in France. No names were mentioned in the encyclical but Jesuit theologians such as Henri de Lubac, Henri Rondet and Henri Bouillard lost their teaching positions, as did the Dominicans Marie-Dominique Chenu and Yves Congar. In 1953, Pope Pius XII summarily removed the provincials of the three French Dominican provinces. In 1953–1954, the Vatican intervened to stop the experiment of the worker priests. One can well understand why the progressive French bishops and theologians were not happy with the papal election of Roncalli a few years later. Perhaps he did learn something from the French experience, but he was identified with the opposition to everything that was taking place in France.

In January 1953, Pius XII made Roncalli a cardinal and appointed him archbishop of Venice. Again there was nothing in Venice that indicated what later occurred at Vatican II. Roncalli held a diocesan synod in November 1957, but there was no debate or discussion, only the acceptance of previously written documents which did not bring about any real change.

After his election as pope, John surprised practically everyone by announcing on Jan. 25, 1959, three major undertakings for the life of the church — a diocesan synod for Rome, an ecumenical council for the universal church and the revision of the Code of Canon Law. I was
doing my doctoral studies in Rome at that time and like everyone else was looking for clues about what John had in mind.

The Roman Synod was held in January 1960. In my view, it was a disaster and merely confirmed existing understandings and practices. The sympathetic biographer of John XXIII, Peter Hebblethwaite, pointed out the only function of the members of the synod (the priests of Rome) was to applaud the prepackaged 755 articles that were read to them. The synod’s detailed provisions did not suggest the rustle of a new Pentacost (178).

John XXIII had made his alma mater, the Lateran University, a full-fledged pontifical university. Its leadership and faculty were quite conservative, clearly associated with the Roman Curia and determined to play a leading role in Catholic theology. In late 1960, Monsignor Antonio Romeo of the Lateran, in its publication *Divinitas*, launched a strong and intemperate attack on the Jesuit professors at the Pontifical Biblical Institute. Before I left Rome in June 1961 to begin teaching at St. Bernard’s Seminary in Rochester, N.Y., my teacher and friend, Father Francis X. Murphy took me out to lunch. Murphy regaled me with stories about the shenanigans of the Roman Curia and their attempt to make sure the council did nothing new. Many of these stories appeared in the famous “Letter from Vatican City” published in the fall of 1962 at the beginning of the council in *The New Yorker*. The article was signed by Xavier Rynne (Murphy’s mother’s maiden name), but years later he admitted he was the true author.

I was not in Rome after June 1961, but what I heard and read while teaching at St. Bernard’s was not encouraging for the future of the council. In February 1962, John issued the apostolic constitution, “Veterum Sapientia,” praising Latin as the official language of the church and calling for all seminary professors throughout the world to teach philosophy and theology in Latin. The document also urged all bishops to see that none of their subjects “eager for novelties” write against the use of Latin either in teaching the sacred disciplines or in the liturgy. This was certainly a blow for those of us who hoped there might be the use of some vernacular in the liturgy coming from the forthcoming council. Later in 1962, two of the Jesuit professors at the Biblical Institute — Stanislas Lyonnet and Maximilian Zerwick — who had been attacked earlier by Romeo — were suspended from
their teaching. I also found out that my teacher of moral theology at the Gregorian, Josef Fuchs, was not allowed to teach seminarians. In August 1962, the Holy Office under Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani issued a monitum (warning) about the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ. The signs coming from Rome were ominous. The council was apparently not going to be a vehicle for reform or change in the church.

Meanwhile the actual work of preparing for the council began. Pope John himself made the decision that the Central Theological Commission and the 10 subcommissions which would write the preparatory documents would be presided over by the curial cardinal who headed the corresponding congregation in the Curia. Thus, Cardinal Ottaviani, the head of the Holy Office, presided over the Central Theological Commission. The preparation of the documents for the council was firmly in the hands of the Roman Curia, which was known for its very conservative views. According to Hebblethwaite, the pope worked very closely with the Curia in preparing for the council. He read all the proposed documents, annotated them and commented on them. He publicly and lavishly praised the proposed texts as the work of magnificent, edifying and most devoted hard work. At the end of the fifth session of the Central Commission in April 1962, Pope John maintained that the consent of the bishops would not be difficult to attain for these documents and their approval would be unanimous (Hebblethwaite 207–212). The general feeling was that the work of the council would be finished in one session.

The reality was completely different. The bishops of the world in the council rejected all the preparatory texts except for the one on the liturgy. The liturgical subcommission had a much broader membership including most of the outstanding European liturgical scholars. Only during the first session of the council did it become clear that the majority of the council fathers would reject the preparatory documents. As a result, the council ultimately needed four sessions to rewrite and approve its own documents.

A “progressive myth” developed that in having the Curia prepare the documents for the council, and even in his own seemingly enthusiastic support of these documents, Pope John was using his peasant shrewdness to outmaneuver the Curia. Hebblethwaite rightly rejects
this thesis. John was convinced that the Curia people had produced good working documents that would be ultimately approved by the upcoming council.

What I have just presented is by definition a one-sided picture of Angelo Roncalli. My purpose was to prove the thesis that Roncalli, when he called the council and even at its very beginning, had no clear idea of the changes that Vatican II would ultimately bring about. In a sense the results of the council were truly a surprise even for Roncalli. In the end, I think this fact points to his greatness and his being a role model for all of us. He was open to the call of the Spirit and, as a true pilgrim Christian, grew in wisdom, age and grace before God and people. But this understanding raises the further question. Why did he change? What was it about him that disposed him to be open to change and development?

**Why did John XXIII change?**

As Christians we strongly believe in the grace and gift of the Holy Spirit. All of us are called to be sensitive to the spirit and to try to discern what the spirit is calling us to do. However, the role of the spirit and the personal discernment of the spirit are not always easy to fathom. There were other people at the council and in the work preparing for it who did not grow and change in the same way as John XXIII. But there is no doubt that John himself clearly understood his call for the council as an inspiration of the Holy Spirit. When John mentioned the council to his secretary, Monsignor Loris Capovilla, he noticed the worried expression on his face. John said to him, “You are fearful that the pope is too old for this venture. But you are far too cautious.” “When we believe that an inspiration comes to us from the Holy Spirit, we must follow it: What happens after that is not our responsibility” (Suenens 65). The Catholic tradition also recognizes that the divine works in and through the human. What was there about John XXIII that made him open to appreciating the need for reform in the church as ultimately found in Vatican II? Four factors come to mind.

First is his own personality. He was a warm person who was open to others and consequently learned from them. He was unpretentious and therefore willing to listen to what others had to say and offer. He was optimistic based on an optimism both of nature and of grace so that he
was not fearful of change. He was open in the best sense of the term. Recall how he strongly opposed the prophets of gloom.

Second, as mentioned earlier, he had an interest in history and wrote some historical works. Historical study reminds us that things have changed over time. An historical perspective helps open one’s mind to recognize the need for ongoing development. In his talk at the opening of the council (even then I do not think he had a clear idea of the reforms that Vatican II would actually bring about) he insisted that history is the teacher of life but some people believe as if they have learned nothing from history.

Third, John had always understood the council to be a pastoral council and not a dogmatic council. By definition the concept of pastoral is more flexible than dogmatic. John saw himself primarily as a pastor and not as a theologian or intellectual. Consequently, he was very open to what would make faith more deep and penetrating in the daily life of the Christian community and of all believers.

Fourth, John learned much from the advice and participation of a number of influential cardinals and bishops who were upset with the preparatory documents proposed by the curia-dominated commissions. Among these people were Cardinal Bea, whom John appointed as president of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, and Cardinals Suenens (Belgium), Frings and Döpfner (Germany), Liénart (France), Alfrink (Holland), and Léger (Canada). Suenens had sent to the pope his own proposal for what he thought the council should do and found that the pope was quite receptive to these ideas.

Suenens mentions the first meeting that the steering committee for the council had with the pope. The meeting was quite informal and during it Suenens asked the pope, “Why did you appoint the prefects of the Roman congregations to head the preparatory commissions?” The pope laughed and said, “You’re quite right, but I didn’t have the courage” (Suenens 71). Obviously, there were many other voices inside and outside the preparatory and actual work of the council who were also calling for more substantial reform. There is no doubt that Pope John learned much from others.
In conclusion, Vatican II stands as the legacy of Pope John XXIII for the Catholic Church. But an equally important legacy and the reason why he is a role model for all of us comes from the fact that he was a pilgrim Christian who was always open to the Spirit and grew in wisdom, age and grace before God and people.

WORKS CITED


*Father Charles E. Curran, STD, is the Elizabeth Scurlock University Professor of Human Values at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas.*
A New Council? Reflections on the Future of the Church
by Richard R. Gaillardetz

“We are a ‘Vatican II’ parish.” “What can we do about our pastor, who is pre-Vatican II?” “Many of the problems facing the church today are because of Vatican II.” “Vatican II clearly taught …”

We hear statements like these regularly if we are active in the Catholic Church today. “Vatican II” has become a place marker in the ecclesiastical and ideological geography of contemporary Catholicism. I say this knowing full well that there are two generations of young Catholics now, for whom the Second Vatican Council is ancient history. Yet the fact that they do not identify the council as formative to their Catholic identity does not change the fact that the church they live in has been profoundly shaped by the council. I believe that if we are to accurately understand where the Catholic Church is today, and consider the future that lies before it, we will need to understand the importance of the Second Vatican Council. I will be arguing this evening that how we look to the future has a lot to do with how we understand the contributions and the limits of the Second Vatican Council. There is no way in which I can summarize the council’s teaching this evening, but it will be worth taking a few minutes to recall its import and outline some of the central shifts inaugurated by the council.

I. A CONCILIAR VISION
On Jan. 25, 1959, barely three months after his election, at the Basilica of St. Paul outside the walls of Rome, Pope John XXIII announced to 17 cardinals the three central elements of his papal agenda: 1. Hold a diocesan synod for the church of Rome; 2. convene an ecumenical council, a gathering of all the bishops from throughout the world, for the first time in almost 90 years and for only the 21st time in the history of the church; 3. revise and modernize the code of canon law then in force since 1917 (Alberigo). The announcement of the council received by far the most attention, in no small part because the papacy had become such a powerful institution under the reign of Pope Pius XII that many had come to believe that ecumenical councils were no longer necessary. After three and half years of preparation, the council
opened in October 1962. It would meet for 90 days each fall through 1965 and promulgate 16 different documents.

The length of the council was much longer than had originally been anticipated. In fact, Pope John, who had just received news that he had terminal cancer when the council opened, had hoped that he would live to see the close of the council after but one session. The council’s extended length was due, in no small measure, to the bishops’ determination to substantially rework almost all of the preparatory draft documents that were given before and over the course of the council.

The temptation, particularly for scholars, is to consider the fruit of the council largely in terms of those 16 documents. However, Joseph Komonchak has argued persuasively that the council’s impact must be understood from three perspectives: the council as “experience,” the council as “event,” and the council as teaching, particularly as that teaching is located in the council’s final documents (Komonchak). By experience, he means the sum total of all the motives, intentions, actions, conversations and encounters engaged in by the participants at the council. We are fortunate to have access to numerous diaries of those who participated in the council, and these diaries and memoirs give ample evidence of the council’s impact on the participants. The council as experience is an important part of the council’s impact on our church but it is not so easily reconstructed. Distinct but related to the council as experience are the council’s final documents. These documents are in some ways the fruit of the conciliar experience, and as many of you are well aware, they have been the object of extensive scholarly research (Komonchak). Finally we might speak of the council as an event, that is to say, an occurrence that is universally recognized as a break or a rupture from the ordinary. Event, so understood, would appear to involve a sense of discontinuity with what has gone before and that brings us to the crucial issue of how one interprets the council in relation to the larger Catholic tradition.

A. Interpreting the Council

Recently, Pope Benedict XVI has identified a conflict between two different manners of interpreting the teaching of the council (Ratzinger & Messori). He characterizes the first approach as presupposing a “hermeneutics of discontinuity and rupture.” In his view, this interpretive stance highlights a marked discontinuity between the earlier Catholic tradition and what was effected at Vatican II.
1. A Hermeneutics of Discontinuity and Rupture
Advocates of this hermeneutical perspective, it is held, presume a radical break and even repudiation of much of the earlier tradition. In the view of some figures in the Vatican, this hermeneutics of discontinuity and rupture has achieved dominance in contemporary Catholic thought. It is, they contend, embodied in the major five-volume study of the council undertaken by the “Bologna School” under the leadership of Giuseppe Alberigo (Alberigo & Komonchak).

2. A Hermeneutics of Reform
The pope rejects this hermeneutical perspective and advocates instead a “hermeneutics of reform.” This approach would privilege the broader continuity of the council’s teaching with the earlier Catholic tradition. The 1985 Extraordinary Synod, convened by Pope John Paul II to access the implementation of the council’s teachings, offered some principles that ought to govern the authentic interpretation of the council. Although generally sound, John O’Malley has noted that they are heavily weighted toward asserting the council’s continuity with the earlier tradition. There is little acknowledgment of the undeniable aspects of the council’s teaching that were discontinuous with earlier traditions (O’Malley). This approach focuses less on Vatican II as an ecclesial event and more on the authoritative status of the final form of the council documents themselves. It is these documents, in their final form, and not a larger textual history or a vague appeal to “the spirit of the council” that should command the assent of Catholics. This hermeneutics of reform is proposed in the major new study on the council offered by noted church historian Bishop Agostino Marchetto, who now serves as secretary for the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (Marchetto).

3. Ormond Rush: Distinguishing between Macro- and Micro-Ruptures
The pope is certainly right to be concerned that studies of the council not exaggerate the elements of discontinuity found in council teaching. Yet one might wonder whether these two hermeneutical approaches can be so easily opposed to one another. Would not an adequate hermeneutics of the council need to attend to both continuity and discontinuity? Australian theologian Ormond Rush has provided a helpful framework for interpreting council documents, one which avoids a false absolutizing of either continuity or discontinuity. Rush distinguishes between a “macro-rupture,” a fundamental severance with the great tradition of the church,
and a “micro-rupture,” which reflects a genuine innovation or shift that must be considered discontinuous with some aspect of the previous tradition but which can also be read as “rejuvenating that broader tradition” (Rush; Thiel). I agree with Rush that we need to affirm the genuine micro-ruptures evident in the conciliar documents that constituted a break, particularly with the baroque or post-Tridentine Catholicism of the previous four centuries, while remaining in continuity with a more ancient tradition.

B. Central Shifts or Micro-Ruptures Evident in the Teaching of Vatican II

I would like to propose four micro-ruptures that the council brought about as with respect to earlier church understanding and practice. These can be characterized as shifts from a dominant pre-conciliar perspective to an alternative viewpoint. Time constraints require that I do little more than list these ruptures or shifts, each of which merits a separate talk.

1. From a Juridical, Clerical and Triumphalist Account of the Church to a Sacramental and Theological Account of the Church

At the council one Bishop Emile de Smedt of Bruges gave an influential speech in which he criticized the preparatory draft on the church as reflecting little more than the status quo. It reflected an account of the church that focused excessively on the active role of the clergy, seemed preoccupied with juridical questions of power and jurisdiction, and evinced a spirit of triumphalism with respect to other Christian traditions. The two constitutions that emerged from the council suggested a dramatically different vision of the church. This new vision was not a trendy novelty but in fact a profound retrieval of the ancient biblical, sacramental and theological foundations of the church that had been gradually eclipsed over the course of the second millennium. This vision of the church started with the sacrament of baptism and saw the church as a communion of believers bound together by the power of the Holy Spirit. It was a community animated by the celebration of the Eucharist, a community that acknowledged its pilgrim status as the people of God who, although guided by the Holy Spirit, had not yet achieved its perfection and therefore was always in need of reform and renewal.

2. From a Siege Mentality to Dialogical Engagement with Other Christians, Other Religions and the World

John O’Malley has argued that it is a mistake to evaluate the effect of Vatican II simply in terms of its doctrine. For O’Malley, one of the
most striking features of the council was its emphasis on the priority of dialogue, dialogue among the members of the church, dialogue with other Christians, other religions and the world itself (O’Malley).

3. From a Mechanistic View of the Church’s Sacramental Life to a Genuine Liturgical Theology and Spirituality
The third shift might be characterized as a shift away from a more mechanistic and rubrical view of sacraments and the liturgical life to a view that saw liturgical prayer as a matter of being drawn into a communal participation in the triune life of God, a pattern of prayer shaped by the paschal mystery.

4. From Governance Over the Church to Leadership in Service of the Church
Here too we see a movement away from juridical and even monarchical conceptions of church office and toward a view of ordained ministry characterized by service to the people of God. Bishops and priests were called to be pastors more than rulers and the genuine authority of bishops was affirmed; they were not mere delegates of the pope but true pastors of their churches. And perhaps the most important teaching of the council emerged in this area: the council taught that the whole college of bishops shared with the bishop of Rome pastoral responsibility for the whole church. The magisterium, the council taught, was not above the Word of God but was placed at its service. Clergy were encouraged to listen to the faithful, and the faithful, for their part, were acknowledged to possess a supernatural instinct for the faith, the so-called sensus fidei.

II. ASSESSING THE COUNCIL’S IMPLEMENTATION
These shifts, or micro-ruptures, are clearly evident when we explore the teaching of the council. However, many church leaders and commentators will suggest that although the rhetoric of the council has seeped into the life of the church — that is, we talk easily now about ecumenical relations with other Christians, of empowering the laity, of ministry as service and so on — the reality suggests that many church structures, policies and practices, in spite of the new rhetoric, remain mired in the older view of things.

How do we explain this incongruity between the rhetoric of Vatican II and the reality of life on the ground where much of the council’s teaching, in the minds of some, has yet to be realized? Here we come to the problems related to the implementation of the council in the life of the church.
No one can dispute the significant gains that have been made over the last four decades. At the same time I would contend that much of the council’s vision was compromised by crucial failures to translate that vision into institutional structures. Let me offer three examples.

A. The Synod of Bishops
As I already noted, no assessment of the council’s many contributions could overlook its teaching on episcopal collegiality. Unfortunately, because so much of the council’s energy was expended in arguing for the principle of collegiality itself, very little energy was expended in considering how the council’s teaching on collegiality might be institutionalized. One important exception concerned the establishment of an episcopal synod. Immediately preceding the council, Cardinal Bernard Alfrink of Utrecht had already called for a permanent body of bishops to assist in the government of the universal church loosely based on the model of the permanent synods of the eastern churches. During the council this proposal was picked up by Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV Saigh. Drawing on his experience of the eastern churches with permanent synods, he offered them as a model for the creation of a synodal body to assist the pope in governance of the universal church. This echoed a number of similar proposals that had been floated by various bishops who were looking for ways to enhance the participation of the bishops in decisions involving the universal church. At one point a letter requesting the creation of a synod was sent to the pope with the signatures of some 500 bishops (Laurentin).

Pope Paul VI’s response to these requests came in the form of “Apostolica Sollicitudo,” a document hastily drafted by Cardinal Marella, creating the synod of bishops. The document was received with less than enthusiasm by many at the council. First, by issuing the document motu proprio, that is, by the pope’s own authority, Paul VI was in some ways violating the spirit of the council in which decisions were being made collegially. Second, what was envisioned in the document was a far cry from what many bishops had called for. The synod of bishops, as proposed in “Apostolica Sollicitudo,” was not to be a standing synod with deliberative authority, but an occasional gathering of representative bishops for a limited period of time with strictly consultative power.
As the synod of bishops has developed over the intervening four decades, three different synodal forms have emerged: ordinary synods that meet every three or four years; extraordinary synods that are convened to address special topics, often at the behest of the pope, and special synods which address issues of concern to particular regional churches. However, many have claimed that these synods were emasculated and have failed to serve as truly effective instruments of episcopal collegiality.

One major criticism is that too often the agenda and to a certain extent those who can participate in the synods are controlled by the Curia. The process itself involves participants having to listen to large numbers of mind-numbing interventions, often on unrelated topics, limiting the possibilities for any real interchange of ideas. Some of these concerns have been addressed by Pope Benedict XVI, who revised synodal procedures for the recent Synod on the Eucharist, shortening the length of the speeches and scheduling a daily session for open debate among the participants. The final document emerging from these synods is not produced by the synod participants themselves but the pope. In fact, only propositions garnering 95 percent approval are even passed on to the pope for his consideration. And the most important criticism is that the synods have only consultative rather than deliberative authority (Coriden). What has resulted, in other words, is an institution that sounds very collegial but in fact expresses very little of the council’s vision of genuine shared responsibility between pope and bishops regarding the governance of the church.

B. The Liturgical Renewal
When we consider the liturgical renewal, it is easy to focus on the many gains that have been achieved. We have seen enormous gains as regards the council’s call for a full, conscious and active participation of all the faithful in the life of the church. The extensive use of vernacular languages in the celebration of the liturgy has certainly made the liturgy much more understandable to large numbers of the faithful, as was called for by the council. And the restoration of the catechumenate may have been the single most potent instrument in the renewal of parish life to have emerged out of the conciliar vision. Yet many have remained dissatisfied with the results of the post-conciliar liturgical renewal.
Critics on the right have complained that the liturgical reforms have not been accompanied by a sufficiently mature liturgical spirituality, one which appreciates the importance, not only of a more communitarian sensibility, but of a need for silence, ritual and symbolic formality and a contemplative spirit. Critics on the left have rightly noted that, once again, some of the hopes of the council were dashed in the decades immediately after the council because of ecclesiastical infighting regarding who was to have final responsibility for the liturgical renewal.

Piero Marini’s recent book, *A Challenging Reform*, details the remarkable work of the Consilium, a special commission separate from the traditional curial structures that was given the principal responsibility for implementing the reform of Vatican II’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, “Sacrosanctum Concilium.” This remarkable commission, headed by Cardinal Lercaro of Bologna and driven by the indefatigable liturgical scholar Annibale Bugnini, undertook the monumental work of revising the entire corpus of liturgical books and rituals, culminating in the Missal of Pope Paul VI. The commission lasted from 1964 to 1969, and its unusual independence from the Curia, its reputation for collaboration and a high level of liturgical scholarship allowed it to provide a far-reaching implementation of the council’s liturgical vision. Yet, there were obvious limits to its work, given its chronological proximity to the council. In 1969 its mission was taken over by the Congregation of Divine Worship, and while that congregation ably continued the liturgical reform over the next five years, it inevitably exerted what Marini referred to as a pronounced “curialization” of the liturgical reform (Marini; Ferrone). This curialization of the liturgical reform became even more pronounced some six years later when, in 1975, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments were combined into one curial office. If the Consilium was composed almost entirely of bishops and scholars expert in the liturgy, this was much less the case for the newly combined congregation. The international character of the earlier Consilium was greatly diminished, the number of theological consultors was reduced dramatically from two hundred to eighteen (Marini). This liturgical curialization, with important exceptions, placed a profound brake on the liturgical renewal that is still being felt today.
According to Rita Ferrone, the dramatic disparity in which the liturgical reform went forward is evident in a comparison of two rites promulgated within two and half years of one another, the Rite of Penance and the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (Ferrone). In the former case much of the tremendous historical and liturgical scholarship was simply ignored. The new Rite of Penance included three forms: the first calling for a revision of the individual celebration of the sacrament of penance between an individual penitent and a priest, the second calling for a communal celebration followed by individual confession, and a third calling for a communal celebration with the offering of general absolution. The third form was almost immediately withdrawn as a legitimate pastoral option, the second form is in most parishes only celebrated once or twice a year, leaving the third, most resembling the practice that emerged in the wake of the Council of Trent, as the dominant form. Even then, many of the changes like doing away with the traditional opening statement of the penitent, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned …” or encouraging a greater use of scripture in the celebration of the sacrament, have largely been ignored. Should we be surprised, then, by the diminished frequency and/or interest in the celebration of this sacrament by Catholics today? By contrast, the RCIA, in spite of its length and complexity, has been tremendously successful here in the United States.

The ongoing implementation of the council’s teaching on the liturgy after 1975 was uneven. Liturgical scholarship continued to advance, and at least here in the United States, there was an emphasis on liturgical education that provided better-trained liturgists at the parish and diocesan level that provided a certain pastoral stability to the liturgical reform movement. At the same time there was increased criticism of the liturgical reform as fundamentally misguided, and influential voices spoke out more insistently for a reform of the reform that would address what were seen as fundamental flaws in the post-conciliar liturgical reform. These calls were heard with greater and greater sympathy in the Vatican.

Many see 1984 as a decisive turning point. It was that year that Pope John Paul II granted permission for limited use of the Tridentine Rite of the Mass. Archbishop Rembert Weakland warned that this move would undermine the legitimacy of the council’s liturgical renewal.
As we know, this opening has culminated in Pope Benedict’s motu proprio, Summorum pontificum, which has further legitimated the Tridentine rite as an equally legitimate “extraordinary form” of the celebration of the Mass. The last 20 years have also seen a reversal of the council’s assumption that the bulk of liturgical adaptation and vernacular translation would be done by regional episcopal conferences. The Vatican has resolutely reclaimed primary authority for all liturgical matters.

Finally, let us consider the implementation of the council in the 1983 Code of Canon Law.

C. The 1983 Code of Canon Law
Recall that at the beginning of Pope John’s pontificate he had announced his intention to revise the Code of Canon Law. As the council proceeded it became evident that this revision would have to wait until the council had been completed before the revisions could be undertaken. Pope John XXIII created the Pontifical Commission for the Revision of the Code of Canon Law. This commission, however, suspended its activity until the close of the council. Soon after the close of the council, work began for the revision of the code. This new code was intended as a codification of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. As such it was a mixed success. The process of revision was handicapped in part by the decision to have each subcommittee start with the 1917 code as the basis for its work. This constituted an almost immediate narrowing of the project.

It became more a redrafting of the existing rules to conform to the council documents than a thoroughgoing revision of the church’s canonical system (Coriden).

Although the documents of the council are frequently cited in the code, and important conciliar themes do appear, Eugenio Corecco contends that the project to revise the code of canon law may simply have been undertaken too soon after the close of the council. Unlike the case of the liturgical reform, where a special commission was given the task of implementing one document, the Commission for the Revision of the Code of Canon Law was charged with revising the code in light of all 16 documents. This represented a monumental task, and one that had to be undertaken before any systematic
interpretations of the council’s teaching could be undertaken. According to Correcco, the commission charged with the revision “lacked the necessary distance from the conciliar event and, instead of undertaking a work of comprehensive comparative interpretation of the conciliar texts, preferred to make a selection” (Corecco). Most of the canonists who served on the commission had themselves been trained prior to the council, rendering it difficult for them to take sufficiently into account the new ecclesiological vision presented by the council. Consequently, in spite of significant advances, the new code too often failed at a deeper level to reflect adequately the council’s ecclesiology. For example, Book II of the new code is dedicated to the church as people of God, yet it does not succeed in grasping the full ecclesiological and canonical implications of key conciliar insights regarding the common priesthood of all believers and the sensus fidei (Corecco).

This shortcoming is evident when we consider the few instances where the code considers structures suitable for consulting the faithful (Euart).

For example, the code encourages the creation of diocesan pastoral councils (c. 511) and the convocation of diocesan synods (cc. 460–8); in both instances lay participation is envisioned. However, these structures are only recommended by the code whereas diocesan presbyteral councils are mandated by canon law (c. 495).

There is another structure mandated by the code that, in principle, could offer an important venue for consultation of the faithful and that is the parish visitation. The Code of Canon Law requires that the bishop or a proxy visit all parishes in his diocese over a five-year period (c. 396.1). Of course structures for consultation are not limited to these canonical provisions. In many dioceses one finds various boards and commissions created to oversee important dimensions of the church’s ministry and mission, and many of these boards and commissions have significant lay representation.

Finally, we must note the code’s failure to give due emphasis to the council’s teaching on the charisms that are given by the Spirit to the entire Christian faithful (Corecco). So where the council, at several
points, acknowledges both the right and obligation of the faithful to exercise the charisms that the Spirit has given them, the code pays very little attention to these rights and obligations.

These three examples suggest structural ways in which key elements of the council’s vision were frustrated at the level of implementation. This failure begs the question: where do we go from here?

III. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?
We can identify three possible options: 1. We might renew our efforts to complete the structural implementation of the council’s teaching; 2. we might regard the structural implementation as complete and turn to the evangelical and missiological elements of the council’s teaching as the focus of our implementation; 3. we might recognize that we are at a crossroads in the church, one that requires that we go beyond the agenda of Vatican II to consider the need for a new council.

A. Renewed Determination to Complete the Implementation of Conciliar Teaching
Many church commentators insist that the post-conciliar reforms have not gone far enough and that, particularly in the face of the recent clerical sexual abuse scandal exacerbated by the gross malfeasance of church leadership, further structural or organizational reform is still required. This approach argues that we must redouble our efforts to complete the authentic and comprehensive implementation of the teaching of Vatican II.

Consider the aforementioned example of the council’s teaching on the office of the bishop and episcopal collegiality: One could argue that an authentic implementation of the council’s teaching would require a comprehensive reform of the structure of episcopal synods, bishops’ conferences and the Roman Curia itself. It would require a reform of the procedures by which bishops are appointed, giving a much larger role to the local church, and would require that clergy only be ordained bishops who will actually serve as pastors of existing local churches. It would make the transfer of bishops from diocese to diocese the exception rather than the rule, eliminating episcopal careerism.

Turning to the liturgical reform, one could argue that what is needed is a return to the council’s assumption that the episcopal conferences and
not the Curia would have primary responsibility for cultural adaptation of the liturgy and the work of vernacular liturgical translations. There is considerable merit for this agenda for ongoing structural reform. The difficulty, of course, is that given our current structures, it is difficult to imagine how such a reform might be undertaken.

B. Shift from Structural Church Reform to a Renewed Emphasis on Evangelization and Church Mission

There are other voices in the church, including some influential bishops and Vatican officials, who have questioned the continued focus on institutional or organizational reform, contending that the energy of the church today needs to be redirected from structural church reform to the church’s mission to be an evangelizing presence in the world. This view has often been expressed by the archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Francis George. According to Peter Feuerherd:

One of George’s favorite themes is that the church has spent enough time focusing on itself and now must spend more time on the work of conversion. He sees evangelization as the solution to perennial problems such as the looming priest shortage.

I think this viewpoint can fairly be attributed to Pope Benedict XVI as well (Ratzinger). Vatican reporter John Allen has described Pope Benedict as advocating for, alternatively, an “evangelical Catholicism” or “an affirmative orthodoxy.” In the pope’s view the most pressing issues facing the church today concern the dictatorship of relativism that has made it much more difficult for Catholics to sustain a thick sense of Catholic identity. He contends that what is required is a new evangelization that focuses, not on contentious issues that have so often stymied Catholics in their commitment to the church, but on the central, positive affirmations of the Catholic Christian faith. Hence, he has addressed his first two encyclicals on such central topics as the nature of Christian hope and Christian love. This viewpoint does not involve, in the mind of Pope Benedict, Cardinal George and others, an abandonment of Vatican II. It does mean acquiring a more profound retrieval of the council’s focus on the need for evangelization and renewed sense of Christian mission. This papal commitment is reflected in the way in which this pontificate has tended to accompany calls for dialogue with other world religions with a more assertive determination to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
The principal difficulty with this project is that it dangerously separates institutional reform from ecclesial mission. The council’s consideration of the church as a universal sacrament of salvation and the church as seed of the kingdom of God presupposes an intrinsic connection between the church’s own structural reality and its mission in the world. Structural church reform cannot be dismissed as a mere left-wing agenda, nor can it be placed in opposition to the church’s mission in the world. Structural church reform is essential precisely in order that the church might better fulfill its mission in the world.

C. Why We Need a New Council
The third alternative involves acknowledging both the contributions of Vatican II and its evident limitations, while proposing the need for a new ecumenical council. We have already talked about a number of the council's contributions; now let me say a few words about its limitations.

1. Vatican II was a Transitional Council
Vatican II was much clearer regarding what it was moving away from than it was aware of what it was moving toward. Its treatment of the laity is a great example. The council was determined to move away from a passive model of the laity whose ecclesial responsibilities were, as the saying goes, “to pray, pay and obey.” On the other hand, the council was not entirely consistent regarding its positive theology of the laity. At one point it wants to emphasize the secular vocation of the laity, and at other points it seemed to recognize the legitimate role of the laity in church governance and ministry.

The truth is that in many ways, contemporary theology has gone beyond the provisional theological formulations of Vatican II. For example, there has been a large body of work concerned with the Christian obligations regarding interreligious dialogue that have explored the question in far more depth than the council was able to do. In the area of ecclesiology we have seen fruitful explorations of themes that appeared in the council documents, but in a rather primitive and unsystematic form. I have in mind here the important theological developments of what is often called an ecclesiology of communion.
2. The Church Today is Facing Pressing Questions that Vatican II Did Not Engage

A second reason for considering a new council lies in the fact that many of the pressing questions facing our church today were simply not considered at Vatican II. For example, although the council certainly had some important things to say about a theology of the laity, there is almost no consideration in the council documents of what we refer to today as lay ecclesial ministry. At the same time important questions concerning the role of women in the life of the church were simply not considered at all by the council. Our pressing shortage of priests requires us today to consider in an entirely new context doctrinal and canonical limitations we place on who can pursue diaconal and priestly ordination.

Karl Rahner rightly observed that perhaps the most important contribution of the Second Vatican Council was the way in which it inaugurated a new phase in the church’s history in which it could now function not merely as a “Western European export firm” but as a true “world church.” Here too the council made important advances in considering the catholicity of the church in a more global perspective, particularly in one of its most theologically mature documents, “Ad Gentes,” the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church. Yet, the council’s treatment of what we refer to today as the inculturation of the gospel was sketchy and, by the standards of contemporary theological reflections on the topic, rather underdeveloped.

3. Vatican Leadership is Operating in a Cautionary Mode, Making it Little Inclined to Engage New Issues

Finally, I think we have to admit that the current ecclesiastical climate does not encourage a reform from above. Vatican leadership currently appears preoccupied with questions of Catholic identity and Allen’s “affirmative orthodoxy.” Consequently they appear little disposed to open debate on matters of contemporary import. An ecumenical council would afford the possibility of a far more in-depth and far-reaching set of debates regarding questions that need to be addressed by the global church.

IV. CONCLUSION

The church has most often turned to ecumenical councils at times when it was faced with new challenges that could not so easily be addressed within its ordinary ecclesiastical structures. The
regular ecclesiastical structures of the church are, as they should be, fundamentally conservative in nature. They are geared towards preserving the integrity of the Great Tradition of the church while at the same time making precise and local pastoral accommodations to changing circumstances. These ecclesiastical structures are ill suited to addressing larger, more comprehensive issues and concerns. Although we are less than 50 years removed from our last ecumenical council, there can be no denying the fact that we live in an age in which monumental cultural changes that used to transpire over centuries now occur over a period of decades and even over the course of a single year. Consider for a moment, the way your own daily life is shaped by the possession of a cell phone, a personal computer, and access to cable television or the Internet. Then recall that none of these were available when Vatican II closed in 1965.

The issues and challenges facing the church today are not the kind that can be dealt with by simply a series of Vatican decrees. What is needed is a context for widespread ecclesial discernment. The advantage of an ecumenical council is that it affords the opportunity for leaders from throughout the world to gather together to deliberate on matters of import. As we saw at Vatican II remarkable things happen when bishops are freed from their daily diocesan responsibilities and are invited to deliberate at length on matters of import for the life of the church. A future council would be far more culturally diverse than any other council in the church’s history. Access to simultaneous translation services not available at Vatican II would guarantee a much higher degree of participation on the part of bishops from throughout the world. Lessons learned at Vatican II would make it very difficult for the Curia to control conciliar debates. Experience has taught that when church leaders are placed in a room together and given sufficient time and freedom to engage one another in conversation, study and prayer, the Spirit can do wondrous things.

Finally, as we consider the dramatic growth of the church of the global south, it is worth considering the possibility that the next ecumenical council ought not be a Vatican III but perhaps a Nairobi or Manila I. That is, a future council gathered, not at the center of ecclesiastical power, but in a part of the world where the church is growing at a dramatic rate, might provide an opportunity to consider in new and unanticipated ways the genuine catholicity of our church.
Ecumenical councils put the church “on display.” What happens at ecumenical councils is more than the writing, debate, revision and approval of documents. What happens at an ecumenical council is an expression, in a more dramatic and concentrated form, of what the church always is. Saints and sinners, the learned and the ignorant, gather together. So gathered, they share their faith, voice their concerns, pray together, 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, archbishop, bishop, religious superior, theologian) and wear somewhat unusual garb should not distract us from the fact that, at heart, they are our brothers, and perhaps one day, our sisters in the faith.

I grant you that it is difficult to know in the present moment where attempts to fulfill the vision of Vatican II end and proposals for a new council begin. We can affirm, however, with the Venerable Bede, that “each day the church gives birth to the church.” Let us have the courage to be faithful midwives, by the power of the Spirit, in the birthing of a new church.
WORKS CITED


*Richard R. Gaillardetz is the Margaret and Thomas Murray and James J. Bacik Professor of Catholic Studies at the University of Toledo.*
It is a pleasure for me to be with you today here at St. Edward’s University to honor Bishop John McCarthy. Our topic, focusing on Zen Buddhism, Catholicism and prayer, is indeed vast. Hence my presentation method will be structured as follows: First I will discuss briefly 10 teachings of Zen which need not be presented in any particular order because Zen teaching does not follow a linear method. Then I will reflect on the significance of these teachings for Catholics as well as for people of other religious groups and on how they might benefit from Zen practice.

Since teaching through word and image helps us humans to ponder and retain thought, I chose to use brief statements representing each of the 10 teachings and have painted them in Chinese calligraphy. The artist, Ms. Amy Yee of Hong Kong, a Zen student in our New Jersey Zendo, has created and painted images to reinforce the statements and the teaching. Using this “show and tell” method, I hope that the 10 paintings will make you aware of how Zen can influence your Catholic prayer, make it more alive, and help you to live more intimately and personally and prayerfully in your Catholic faith.

This first painting expresses the Zen teaching of NOT ALWAYS, which in English translates as IMPERMANENCE: that is, “all things pass.” Notice how the artist depicts this teaching in the image of a waterfall, which like time itself constantly flows; not one drop of water or one moment in time holds still. So for us humans to cling to what, of its very nature, must pass is to incur terrible suffering. Both nature and art constantly remind us that death is the only unchanging, unflowing aspect of existence. Robert Stevens, the contemporary American photo editor, for example, would have us mentally and emotionally contemplate that death is the season of autumn when the wind stops. Note the contrast between the vibrantly flowing waterfall and a wind in autumn that ceases to blow.
Zen urges us not only to acknowledge the truth of NOT ALWAYS but especially to experience it. For sure, Zen would have us breathe IMPERMANENCE with every breath we take and at the same time to realize that we cannot earn our breath, nor can we keep it, and positively to know that it will never come back to us.

How can this teaching enhance our Christian life? We have always known that all things pass. I believe that Wisława Szymborska, a contemporary poet, expresses sensitively and humorously the Christian understanding of impermanence. Szymborska writes:

Nothing can ever happen twice.
In consequence, the sorry fact is
That we arrive here improvised
And leave without the chance to practice.
Even if there is no one dumber,
If you’re the planet’s biggest dunce,
You can’t repeat the class in summer:
This course is only offered once.

What Zen meditation offers us is the opportunity to experience that “this course is only offered once.” It helps us to experience prayer as we experience our breath: We have been awakened to understand that each prayerful moment in our life cannot be earned, cannot be kept and certainly can never come back to us again.

The second painting, ALL THINGS ARE INTERDEPENDENT AND THEIR NATURE IS IMPERMANENT, portrays this teaching in light shining on vines and flowers and perching birds with a tremendous sense of immediacy: a strong bird just landing on a fragile flower. The artist seems to be telling us that life’s impermanence is hazardous and freeing. The painting and statement correlate Zen’s comparison of the idea of impermanence to an infinitely large web with light shining at each interaction of the web. Each point of light enlightens every other point of light while all points of light together enlighten each point of light. So, too, our light is not an isolated
point; instead, it is as vast as the whole universe itself. Inspired by this teaching and interpreting it in verse, a Zen poet wrote:

I compare myself to this tall tree
And I am far taller
For I reach right up to the sun.

Our Catholic prayer proposes to release us from an absorption-in-self in prayer that is so utterly small to a form of prayer that is unimaginably vast. Perhaps the self-turned-in-upon-itself in prayer is most vividly described by the poet Louise Gluck, who writes:

I believe my sin
to be entirely common:
the request for help
masking request for favor
and the plea for pity
thinly veiling complaint.

If our prayer resembles the “sin” described in the verse just quoted: a request for help and favor, or a plea for pity, it will not be a prayer that Zen recognizes. We must ask ourselves, “Does Jesus recognize it?”

The third painting, a tree full of blossoms, breezed into sunlight and shade, portrays the Zen teaching titled PURE BREEZE, and at times, GOLDEN BREEZE, meaning autumnal breeze. The artist illustrates the teaching in a fully blossomed tree whose branches are tilted by the breeze. The blossoms do not resist; instead, they are free from clinging and are enjoying the pure breeze. So, too, people who do not cling, enjoy the pure breeze. They cannot see it but being free from clinging, they feel it.

A wonderful explanation of GOLDEN BREEZE is dramatized in a Zen koan [story] that describes a monk’s approaching Master Unmon and asking, “What will it be when trees wither and fall?” To which Master Unman replies, “You will embody the golden/autumnal tree.” What the master is telling the monk is, to experience the GOLDEN BREEZE is to know the meaning of “when trees wither and fall.” The story points out that the monk asks his question in all earnestness. Only questions asked in all earnestness deserve a Zen answer.
In real life I experienced the concrete living out of this story. Studying with Yamada Roshi of Kamakura, who never charged his students anything for studying with him, I saw how he demanded that his students ask for his guidance with total earnestness. Seeking and following his wise council, we understood that to experience the GOLDEN BREEZE was to know “what it [will] be like when [we] wither and die.” We humans embody the autumnal breeze! We must ask ourselves what we can learn from it.

How can we Catholics take this teaching to heart? How can we ask for guidance with complete earnestness? Especially today, having learned so much about the universe, cosmology and human nature, we understand better that the entire universe is evolving and that everything in the universe is made of the same stardust. Hence all is impermanent, interconnected and, what seems an oxymoron, independent. Theologians, scientists and physicists, among others, keep us well informed of the discoveries they are making in this emerging universe. For his part, Richard Feynman, an American physicist teaches that the world is discrete, noncontinuous, unconnected. He writes that even space consists of a network of isolated points like cells in a cellular automaton, and that time itself flows in discrete steps. Hence if the world as a consistent whole is shattered, only the GOLDEN BREEZE will remain.

Louise Gluck offers her version of the GOLDEN BREEZE when she writes:

The world  
Was whole because  
It shattered.  
When it shattered  
Then we knew what it was.

What will our prayer be, if it is, like the GOLDEN BREEZE, absolutely free?

The statement in the fourth painting teaches that THE WAY CAN ONLY BE SEEN FROM YOUR AWAKENED MIND. The artist paints an image of plant life instead of a winding path, which only the awakened mind may see, indicating
that there is no point to searching on the outside. Just as there is no
fragrance outside the flower, there is no path to the Buddha outside the
awakened mind.

A Zen koan sheds light on this teaching. It tells us that a monk named
Echo, in all earnestness, asks his teacher, “What is the Buddha?” At once
the teacher responds and says, “You are, Echo.” What the teacher is
teaching the monk is not to worry or look for the Way outside himself.
Instead, Echo’s awakened mind must see that he himself is Buddha.

You are the Buddha. Your own Buddha is the true Buddha. Your own light
is the true light. If you look for the Buddha, the Way, outside of your own
mind, you will find nothing. Awaken . . . awaken your mind and know
who you are.

There are Catholic scripture scholars who stress that each person’s
interpretation of a scripture text is the true interpretation for that person.
Hence, for you, your Christ is the true Christ. Your understanding, your
vision is the gift given to you. It is your path, your vocation. You are to
search for your Christ in prayer and not imitate or follow the Christ of
another person. The phrase St. Gregory of Nazianzus directed to Christ,
“My Christ!” strengthens us.

I would like to tell you about a book that can reinforce for us the truth
that each one of us has a Christ — the true Christ for us. The book is
about the beauty of trees and was written by Calvin Tudge in 2006. The
author tells us he saw trees as being remarkably complex, lovely to look
upon and infinitely varied. He wrote that if humanity had only one kind
of timber to draw upon, it would think itself blessed. And yet, in reality
we have thousands of kinds of trees — one for every job and for every
domestic caprice. Just so, the one Christ shines forth in the faces of all
humanity, remarkably complex, lovely to look upon and infinitely varied.

In our own prayer we must find our true, unique voice, our own vision,
our own Christ.

This fifth painting illustrates the Zen teaching OUTSIDE THE TREE,
THERE IS NO FRAGRANCE. The artist presents us with a branch of
a tree laden with blossoms. Looking at this painting, in our mind’s eye,
we catch the scent knowing that it exists only inside the tree. What this
teaching signifies is that outside the mind there is no Buddha, and this
thought leads to the Zen teaching that there is no mind and there is no
Buddha. Another teaching claims that the mind is mountains and rivers
and oceans and stars. We become aware that in Zen there seems to be many contradictions — all of which lead to emptiness — all forms are empty.

A Zen koan may shed light on this teaching: One day Master Banzan said to his disciples, “In the three worlds, there is no Dharma. Where [can] you find the mind?”

In Zen to say there is no Dharma is to say there is no universe such as the one we conceive of in our thinking. If this is so, then it follows that the next question be, “Where can you find the mind?” And so we are led to conclude that in this reality there is no space, no time and no causation either.

This particular Zen teaching is most difficult for Christians to accept because it is based on an experience very different from one that teaches us what we know and how we come to know it. Emily Dickinson, an American poet, wrote insightfully about how we experience in the West. In one poem, she writes about how we experience the role of our mind being the shaper of all we know:

The Outer — from the Inner
Derives its magnitude —
"Tis Duke, or Dwarf, according
As is the Central Mood

The Inner — the Outer —
The Brush without the Hand —
Its Picture publishes — precise —
As is the inner Brand

On fine — Arterial Canvas —
A cheek — perchance a Brow —
The Star’s whole secret — in the lake —
Eyes were not meant to know.
When we pray, let us call to mind the message of the fourth painting: **THE WAY CAN ONLY BE SEEN FROM YOUR AWAKENED MIND**, and let us remember the role our mind plays in shaping the Christ we pray to. The mind is “the brush without the hand, painting precisely [our unique image of Christ] on fine arterial canvas.” Our mind intuits life and reality for us. Let us also keep in mind that contemporary scientists believe that in our emerging universe it is our mind that is the consciousness of nature.

This sixth painting illustrates the delusion that something outside us can save us, which is to say that on the other shore we can be saved. We see a lone person trying fruitlessly to reach the shore where he imagines a house and people and nature to rescue him. The awakened mind knows that there is no such shore and so does not seek help from some outside source. **WHEN PEOPLE ARE DELUDED, THE BUDDHA SAVES THEM. WHEN THE PEOPLE AWaken, THEY SAVE THE BUDDA** reinforces once again that “outside the tree there is no fragrance.” No outside figure comes to save us. Instead it is we who, once awakened, freed from delusions, make possible the continuation of Zen insight.

A Zen koan will clarify this teaching. It is from the *Blue Cliff Record* and tells the story of a master who one day sees a monk walking up and down the Zen lecture hall, carrying a hoe.

“What are you doing?” the master asks. “I am searching for the spiritual remains of our dead teacher,” the monk replies.

“What relic of the dead teacher do you seek?” the master asks and goes on to say, “The teacher’s spiritual remains still exist. They are you, yourself.”

Do we Catholics believe that we can save Christ for the world by our own efforts? Of course we experience that life demands something of us and we do acknowledge that we are to bring Christ to the world by our prayer and good works.

The Second Vatican Council, very much in line with Zen practice, encourages us to re-imagine our traditional understanding of prayer, good
works and the ascetical life. “How does it do so?” we may ask. John Thiel in *Theological Studies*, December 2008, answers our question. He explains:

- God’s gifts are truly gifts and not entries into a system of barter and exchange. They cannot be returned through reciprocal action on the part of the gifted.
- God’s gifts dash any possibility of conditional reciprocity because the persons who receive them are themselves created gifts.
- Recognition of these gifts is itself a gift from God and no return to God is expected or even possible.

In the seventh painting, the artist illustrates a lotus plant and root rising out of the muddy waters it grows in. This plant is an icon for the Buddha and for the enlightened mind and very well exemplifies the Zen teaching NOT COMING AND NOT GOING. Instead every moment is rising anew out of the muddy waters of clinging and delusions. This teaching stresses that it is only the present ungraspable moment that is real. Again referring to the *Blue Cliff Record* to clarify a teaching, I read the verses of an enlightened layman, Hojki, who writes:

No coming or going  
Daily, nothing particular,  
Only nodding to myself,  
Nothing to choose, nothing to discard.

No coming or going  
No person in purple …  
This is the hall of Buddha's training  
Mind's empty, all's finished.

Because causality demands a real extension of continuous moments of one thing causing another, causality, for Zen Buddhists, like space and time, is not real. It is simply a construction of the conventional mind. Of course, paying attention to this conventional common-sense mind is necessary for common-sense living. It holds no value in Zen training.
Catholics do know that the world is a single instant of time in which present, past and future lives come together. Even scientists can relate to this concept. For example, Brian Greene, a physicist who teaches at Columbia University and who authored *The Elegant Universe*, states that from a physics viewpoint all the people who ever lived and all those who will ever live, are here now. Still, our common-sense vantage point cannot see what is evident from another dimension.

The Catholic Church calls this vision of extradimensional reality the communion of saints. Sensing the truth of this reality will help us live out our life before a vast audience. The more we tune in to 21st century physics and plurality, the more will our prayer life reflect the emerging universe we are part of. Fundamentally, there is no coming or going. Good works do not cause grace; Zen sitting does not cause enlightenment.

The eighth painting, THE DRAGON ROARS IN THE DEAD TREE, pictures a dead tree set against a mountainous background. The blackness of the tree and the gray shadows cast by the mountains are contrasted to the whiteness of the empty space which signifies light, that is, existence, symbolized by the dragon. It is only in the awakened mind; the dead tree, that the dragon can roar.

Both the dragon and the dead tree are positive symbols in Asia. The dragon is an icon for good human energy that fosters human growth and transformation. The dead tree symbolizes the person who is freed from addictions, opinions and repetitious thinking. These can only lead to a person’s being controlled and driven by the convictions held by others. In this sense, the dead tree is a Zen symbol for supreme enlightenment.

When Yamada Roshi of Kamakura accepted me as his student, he stated that he did not want to make me a Buddhist; he wanted to empty me in imitation of Christ who emptied himself, becoming, thus, a dead tree.

Christians can appreciate Yamada Roshi’s understanding of Christ’s living out this Zen teaching. Jesus said we were to deny our very self, if we were to become his disciples. If we ask how we are to deny ourselves, we can follow Yamada Roshi’s sound and time-proven way, which is certainly
not unchristian. His comment finds its source in the 41st Koan in the *Transmission of Light*, which teaches that we must free ourselves from all false views, not add shackles to shackles by loving the Buddha and the patriarchs, for this kind of blind and pious mind-set belongs to persons who are born and die without freedom.

For his part, the patriarch T’ung-shan also urges us “to put a little spirit into [freesing ourselves].” He advises that if we wish to empty and free ourselves, we must stand on the highest mountain and walk on the floor of the deepest ocean for “stagnant waters do not harbor dragons.”

Very much in keeping with the advice of the patriarch T’ung-shan, the poet Lisel Mueller writes:

> And now, this icy morning,
> We find another tree,
> An aspen, doubled over,
> Split in two at the waist:
> No message, no suicide note.

Our ninth painting represents pure Zen. The calligraphy exclaims that TRUE EMPTINESS IS MARVELOUS EXISTENCE. The artist portrays the meaning in basic, simple things — in mountains, the symbol of life and the universe in totality; in trees, the symbol of life and growth; in a single home, the symbol for humanity — all this with white empty space in the background signifying simplicity and emptiness. We note that there are no things scattered around. All is life and growth and existence and emptiness defining “marvelous existence.”

Zen teaching claims that true emptiness consists of a dustless universe in which all people live together harmoniously. That is, marvelous existence is the indestructible body of the Buddha, empty and bright. Marvelous existence is the mind’s natural vision of the world. This vision is neither a religious, mystical or contemplative state of mind. It is natural; it appears in the mind when the latter is ripe for it. It defines the mind as nothing but mountains and rivers, oceans, and stars.
We draw conclusions that Katherine Raine imagines such an existence when she writes:

It burns in the void
Nothing upholds it
Still it travels.

A verse in the 40th Koan in the *Transmission of Light* questions how one can convey this truth. We wonder if the truth of the marvelous existence is the “it” of Raine’s poem? If yes, Zen teaching would have us believe that seeking the marvelous existence, with empty hands; we return with empty hands. And in that place where fundamentally nothing is acquired, we acquire “it.”

What are Christians to make of this? A possible answer is that we are to follow Christ and to deny our very self for the love of Christ. Zen teaching reinforces our Christian belief that Christ is always open to the moment of our readiness.

Czeslaw Milosz, Nobel Prize winner, writes of the moment in his ninetieth year when he opened himself to the light of faith:

Not soon, as late as the approach of my ninetieth year,
I felt a door opening in me and I entered
The clarity of early morning.
…
We were miserable, we used no more than
… a hundredth part
of the gift we received for our long journey.
…
I knew, always, that I would be a worker
In the vineyard,
As are all men and women living at the same time,
Whether they are aware of it or not.

The teaching statement in the tenth painting is from a chant that is sung every evening during a sesshin [retreat]: DO NOT SQUANDER YOUR LIFE. The artist paints for us a winter scene: Snow is falling and a once beautiful flower is drooping over. It will not last. The snow indicates the arrival of winter and the end of the beautiful flower’s life. Even as it droops, the flower is beautiful, just fatigued after so much living. The scene invites us to live our life beautifully, fully. Like the flower, we must blossom forth now, for in an evolving universe death comes to everyone.
Zen students take this teaching to heart. They know that they will “squander their lives,” that is, waste their precious time, if they do not experience personally the Zen teaching in these words. They understand that wearing the robe of a monk or sitting on their cushions for prolonged periods of time is not enough. They would be squandering their lives.

A Zen koan illustrates this mandate dramatically. It tells students that even if their preaching makes flowers rain from the sky, even if they are people of lofty and spotless conduct, if they do not experience this teaching in their own mind and body, they have no value in the house of the Buddha. They are squandering their life.

Catholics know that being attentive and awakened during prayer is to experience Christ, and so they may find this Zen teaching an added value to their silent prayer. They also know the value of personal relationships and that Christ promises to be in the midst of those whose lives impact one another’s humanly. Not to recognize or to be grateful for the miracle of the loving people in our life is another way of squandering it.

Lisel Mueller writes about the miracle of loving people; for her, these are like the sun shining on a flower in full bloom:

Speaking of marvels, I am alive
Together with you, when I might have been
Alive with anyone under the sun,
When I might have been …
… a peasant wife with not enough food
and not enough love, with my children
dead of the plague …
I might have been …
… a woman without a name
weeping …
for my husband, exchanged for a mule,
my daughter lost in a drunken bet …
This poem is endless, the odds against us are endless,
Our chances of being alive together
Statistically nonexistent;
Still we have made it …
Together with marvels and follies …
And error and human and mercy
And journeys and voices and faces …
And knowledge and tears and chance.

The 10 paintings are like the Zen use of the metaphor of an infinitely large web with a light shining brilliantly at each intersection. Each light enlightens every other light. All the lights together shine forth on each point of light. Each painting adds to the teaching of all the paintings and all the paintings together clarify the teaching of each painting.

*Father Robert Edward Kennedy, SJ, is a Jesuit priest, professor, psychotherapist and Zen roshi in the White Plum lineage.*
March 6, 2009

The Future of the Catholic Church: Challenges in the New Millennium

by Richard P. McBrien, STD

I am exceedingly pleased to participate in a lecture series that honors one of the best bishops that the Catholic Church in the United States has ever had, John E. McCarthy, retired bishop of Austin.

Besides our shared vision of the mission and ministries of the church, we also have in common a somewhat loose connection — loose on my part, at least — with the University of St. Thomas in Houston. Bishop McCarthy received his BA from there in 1956, and later his master’s in Theology in 1979. I taught in the University of St. Thomas’ Institute of Religious Studies summer program in 1970 and 1972.

I see from Bishop McCarthy’s biography that he was ordained an auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Galveston–Houston on March 14, 1979 — almost 30 years ago to the day, and later was installed as bishop of Austin in February 1986. He is one of the few priests selected as an auxiliary bishop by the late great apostolic delegate Archbishop Jean Jadot, who later became bishop of a diocese of his own. Most other Jadot auxiliary bishops, unfortunately, were frozen in place after Pope Paul VI died and after Pope John Paul II readily accepted Archbishop Jadot’s resignation in 1980.

So I am happy to salute Bishop McCarthy on this occasion and to thank him publicly for his long and still-productive service to the church.

We have already begun not only a new century but a new millennium as well. And we have a new pope besides. How is Catholicism likely to change in this 21st century and in the early decades of the third Christian millennium? That is the central question posed in this lecture.

No one really knows, of course, how the Catholic Church will change in this century, or for that matter, in this third Christian millennium. We can only speculate — or, better, extrapolate — from trends that are...
already known and that were given their impetus at the Second Vatican Council, which adjourned more than 43 years ago.

The council gave us a fresh understanding of the church — as sacrament, as people of God, as ecumenical community, as a socially engaged community (something that Bishop McCarthy had a direct hand in promoting and implementing), as a community situated in the world, as a still-unfinished reality, moving through history toward perfect fulfillment in the final reign of God. What follows are some tentative thoughts about the continued evolution and development of the Catholic Church over the next several decades. What might the Catholic Church of today look like in the early decades of this new millennium? Will it be more like the first Christian millennium or the second — or will it be radically different from both?

In this presentation, I will use as a benchmark six ecclesiological themes rooted in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and I will try to indicate how these themes have shaped, and will continue to shape, the church and its ministries as we move together in this new century and the beginning of the third Christian millennium. These six themes will be familiar to many of you, but I am hopeful that my reflection on each of them will refresh your memories and/or inspire you to recommit yourselves to the perennial mission of the church as outlined by Vatican II.

“The best preparation for the new millennium,” Pope John Paul II wrote in his apostolic letter of November 1994, “can only be expressed in a renewed commitment to apply, as faithfully as possible, the teachings of Vatican II to the life of every individual and of the whole church.” When that goal is finally achieved, the church of the second Christian millennium will have given way to the church of the third millennium.

The first and most basic ecclesiological principle at Vatican II is that the church is a mystery, or sacrament, and not only or even primarily an institution or organization.

To say that the church is a mystery, or sacrament, means, in the words of the late Pope Paul VI, that it is “a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God.” In other words, the church is not just a religious
organization to which we belong or which we serve. It is the corporate presence of God in Christ, with a unity created and sustained by the Holy Spirit. “I believe in the church” does not mean “I believe in, am loyal to, the leadership or the rules of the church.” Only God is the proper object of faith — but in this case, God as present and active in the church.

The council’s sacramental understanding of the church helped us to see how essential renewal and reform are to the church’s mission and ministries. More and more since Vatican II, the church has been challenged to practice what it preaches because we recognize now more clearly than before that the church has a missionary obligation to manifest visibly what it embodies invisibly. The church is called to be a visible, communal sign of the invisible, renewing presence of God in the world and in human history.

The principle of sacramentality has immediate impact on the ministries of the church as well. In the face of growing secularization, this means that the ministries of the future, and the ordained ministries in particular, will have to be exercised, even more than in the past, in accordance with a spirituality of martyrdom, literally, of witnessing.

Accordingly, it will no longer be sufficient that a particular ministry be a so-called ecclesial ministry, as if the minister’s official status within the church were of the highest importance. In an age of increasing sensitivity to the principle of sacramentality, ordained ministers and indeed all lay ministers will have an even greater responsibility to be credible witnesses of the Gospel.

“The first means of evangelization,” Pope Paul VI declared in his 1975 apostolic exhortation on evangelization, “Evangelii Nuntiandi,” “is the witness of an authentically Christian life.” He continued: “Modern men and women listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses ... It is therefore primarily by its conduct and by its life that the church will evangelize the world, in other words, by its living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus — the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity” (n. 41).
The 1971 World Synod of Bishops, in its document “Justice in the World,” had made a similar point: “While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, it recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes” (III, par. 2).

And the U.S. Catholic bishops’ 1986 pastoral letter on the economy literally italicized this same point: “All the moral principles that govern the just operation of any economic endeavor apply to the church and its agencies and institutions; indeed the church should be exemplary” (par. 337). Nowhere has the church’s failure been more dismal than in this matter of justice for its own employees, especially those who serve the church at the parish and diocesan levels as lay ministers of one kind or another, and that means especially women.

Because the church is a sacrament, it must evangelize and minister for justice through martyrdom for justice, that is, by living up to the same high moral standards to which it presumes to hold others.

People are looking now, more than ever, for genuine moral and spiritual authority, even as they are rejecting its counterfeits, authoritarianism and pietism. If the church of the second Christian millennium were more like the church of the first Christian millennium, the process by which bishops are selected would have included the direct input of laity, religious and clergy alike. And, it is likely that the quality would have been significantly improved.

A second major ecclesiological principle adopted by the council is embodied in its teaching that the church is the whole People of God. The church is not only the hierarchy, the clergy or members of religious communities. It is the whole community of the baptized. And that community is marked by a rich diversity of gender, of class, of education, of social status, of sexual orientation, of race, of ethnic background and of culture.

One of the council’s most important affirmations, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, “Lumen Gentium,” declares that charisms are available to all the faithful, “of every rank” (n. 12). Indeed, the whole church, and not just the ordained or religiously professed, is called to holiness (“Lumen Gentium,” chap. 5).
We find this people-of-God principle realized, with varying degrees of success, in parish councils, in base communities, in the multiplication of lay ministries, and particularly in ministries associated with the liturgy, education and social justice.

The church that has now entered the 21st century and the third Christian millennium is a church in which an increasing number of its members, laywomen and laymen alike, are ministerially involved.

One doesn’t need any scientific surveys to verify what is obvious to anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear; namely, that the great majority of ministers in parishes today are women, and this is likely to remain so in this new century and new millennium. At the same time, the alienation of many Catholic women from the official church remains one of its most serious pastoral challenges. The highly publicized failure of the U.S. Catholic bishops much more than a decade ago to produce an acceptable pastoral letter on women, after nine years of effort, only underscored the problem.

Moreover, the vocations crisis is worse, not better. The number of seminarians continues to decline, and with that, the number of ordinations. Seminary enrollments dropped almost 60 percent in the three decades following Vatican II. In 1966, the median age of priests was only 47. It is now in the early 60s. As the large number of priests ordained in the 1950s and 1960s reach the end of their active ministries, the already limited supply of priests will decline even more precipitously. And this at a time when demands on priests are increasing, not decreasing. Researchers have described these trends as irreversible.

And yet many Catholics, particularly in the hierarchy, continued to deny a reality that was as close as the nose on their faces. So, too, did Detroit for too many years deny the economic challenge from Japan and Europe, and the impact of global warming and our dependence on foreign oil. Detroit automakers continued to produce huge gas-guzzlers at a time when energy-conscious consumers were looking for smaller, more energy-efficient cars. We all know how that contest came out. Now General Motors and Chrysler are needing billions of dollars in bailouts from the federal government, and their stock prices resemble more the penny-stocks of old rather than the blue-chip stocks
they once were. As of yesterday, GM stock was selling at $1.86 a share, which in most places is less than a gallon of gas.

We remain, however, in a kind of patchwork stage, having changed Mass schedules to permit fewer priests to celebrate more Masses on a given weekend, while closing and consolidating parishes, seminaries and religious houses of formation. One worries also about the lowering of standards of admission in seminaries, ignoring the results of psychological testing (if there is any) or the reports of pastoral supervisors, many of whom are women, regarding the pastoral performance and personal qualities of seminarians. Importing priests from Africa, Asia and certain Eastern European countries is not the answer. In fact, it only generates new problems to be added to the old.

If the church is to maintain the highest pastoral standards in the 21st century and the beginning of the third Christian millennium, it will have to be open to ordained ministries that are not always full time, that are exercised by married people as well as celibates, and by women as well as men. Social scientists like the late Dean Hoge of the Catholic University of America and the late Richard Schoenherr of the University of Wisconsin have strongly recommended these changes, insisting that they would end the current vocations shortage in the Catholic Church. Others, however, seem convinced that the problem will somehow go away through prayer and fasting, or by purging seminaries of so-called dissident theologians and homosexuals, or by more inventive techniques of making personal contact with prospective candidates for the priesthood.

As Eugene Kennedy, the prolific writer and psychologist, stated more than 20 years ago, in an America article entitled “The Problem with No Name”: “… the male-bonded culture of clerical life is in ruins because it is a vestige of the great days of privilege, not because people lack interest in ministry” (April 23, 1988).

A third major ecclesiological theme is contained in the council’s teaching that the mission of the church includes service to human needs in the social, economic and political orders, as well as the preaching of the word and the celebration of the sacraments.
Therefore, evangelization essentially includes the pursuit of justice and the transformation of the world. As Pope Paul VI wrote in “Evangelii Nuntiandi,” evangelization involves “a message especially energetic today about liberation” (n. 29).

It is highly instructive that even so conservative a pope as the late John Paul II should have been so forthright about the church’s social teachings. This was evident not only in his three major social encyclicals — the 1981 encyclical “Laborem Exercens” (On Human Work), the 1988 encyclical “Sollicitudo Rei Socialis” (On the Social Concern of the Church), and his last social encyclical “Centesimus Annus” (The Hundredth Year) — but also in the homilies and public addresses he gave in the United States and Canada, in Central and South America, in Poland, in the Philippines, in Africa, at the United Nations, and elsewhere around the world, and in his fourth pastoral visit to the United States in 1995, when he called upon this nation not to close its arms to immigrants nor its hearts to the poor and the powerless.

Listen again to John Paul II’s words:

“We cannot stand idly by, enjoying our own riches and freedom, if, in any place, the Lazarus of the 20th century stands at our doors,” the pope declared at New York’s Yankee Stadium in October 1979. “In the light of the parable of Christ, riches and freedom mean a special responsibility. Riches and freedom create a special obligation.”

He made the same point again, in New Orleans, La., at Xavier University, in September 1987: “It is not enough to offer to the disadvantaged of the world crumbs of freedom, crumbs of truth and crumbs of bread. The Gospel calls for much more. The parable of the rich man and the poor man is directed to the conscience of humanity and, today in particular, to the conscience of America.”

And preaching in Edmonton, Alberta, in September 1984, the pope used strong words that still ring with power: “In the light of Christ’s words, this poor South will judge the rich North. And the poor people and poor nations — poor in different ways, not only lacking food, but also deprived of freedom and other human
rights — will judge those people who take these goods away from them, amassing to themselves the imperialistic monopoly of economic and political supremacy at the expense of others.”

Finally, speaking at Giants Stadium in New Jersey in October 1995, Pope John Paul II tailored his words specifically for an American audience:

“Compared to many other parts of the world,” he said, “the United States is a privileged, privileged land. Yet, even here there is much poverty and human suffering. There is much need for love and the works of love; there is need for social solidarity” marked by “a great openness and sensitivity to the needs of [one’s] neighbors.”

But one paragraph of his speech stood out above the rest. Introducing the paragraph with a pointed reference to the Statue of Liberty and its world-famous invitation, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses ....,” the pope deplored the unpleasant turn in our political debate.

“Is present-day America,” he asked, “becoming less sensitive, less caring toward the poor, the weak, the stranger, the needy? It must not! Today as before, the United States is called to be a hospitable, hospitable society, a welcoming culture. If America were to turn in on itself, would this not be the beginning of the end of what constitutes the very essence of the ‘American experience’?”

The church is a servant church, like Jesus himself who came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). The world and the church of this new century are looking for people who are prepared to lay down their lives, figuratively and sometimes even literally, in the service of others, like Archbishop Oscar Romero and the six Jesuits and the four church women of El Salvador, more than 25 years ago. The church and the world will turn away from those ministers who seek only to lord it over others, to dominate and control them, to threaten and censure them, and to prevent them from reading and hearing theological and pastoral points of view different from their own.
A fourth ecclesiological theme is expressed in the conciliar teaching that the church is a communion — a communion between God and ourselves (the vertical dimension) and a communion of ourselves with one another in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit (the horizontal dimension). Because the church itself is a communion, its institutional structure is collegial rather than monarchical. Here again, the church of the first Christian millennium was more faithful to the principles and practices of the early church than the church of the second Christian millennium.

The Catholic Church is not a single international parish under the pastoral leadership of the pope, subdivided into dioceses and parishes for administrative efficiency only. The church is a communion of local churches, each of which is the body of Christ in its own particular locale (“Lumen Gentium,” n. 26). Together these local churches constitute the universal church. Their unity is rooted in the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit, manifested especially in the celebration of the Eucharist.

This communal notion of church underscores the traditional importance of councils, synods and conferences of bishops in the life and structure of the church, especially during the first Christian millennium and in the East generally throughout both millennia.

In those areas of the world like our own where democratic, collaborative, participatory forms of governance are taken for granted, ministry needs to be exercised in an increasingly collegial and collaborative manner. Presbyteral councils, in union with the bishops, must exercise deliberative, not only consultative, authority, but in collaboration with other conciliar or synodal expressions of the local church, including especially the diocesan pastoral council. Ministerial spirituality and its canonical forms will necessarily differ from region to region. It will take longer for some regions of the world to accept a married clergy or the presence of women in positions of real pastoral authority. But these developments are inevitable. Some may rather perish than consider the thought. But none of us can hold back the future — or the Holy Spirit.

A fifth ecclesiological theme is expressed in the conciliar principle that the church includes more than Catholics. The church is the whole body of Christ: Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant
and Oriental Christian alike. The church is ecumenical, literally, it embraces “the whole wide world.”

The church’s future ministries will need to be even more ecumenically oriented. Eventually, we may see a formal mutual recognition of the validity of one another’s ordained ministries, as various ecumenical dialogues have recommended, but with little visible success thus far.

We will also have to attend to our common ecumenical project in the broader, literal sense of the word “ecumenical,” embracing “the whole wide world.” The church’s ministers and all its members will need to have a global and universal outlook, seeing the whole world and all of the world’s religious communities as God sees them, loving the world and all humanity as God loves them, and serving the world and all humanity as God serves them; namely, with understanding, compassion, forgiveness, mercy, patience, and a stubborn refusal to give up on our sisters and brothers, inside the church and out.

A sixth, and final, ecclesiological theme is embodied in the conciliar teaching that the church is not an end in itself, but exists always and only for the sake of the reign of God. In other words, the church is an eschatological community.

The church is “already” and “not yet” within the reign of God. Insofar as it is “already” under God’s reign, it is itself a mystery, or sacrament, and an object of faith (“I believe in the church”). Insofar as it is “not yet” within the reign of God, it is a sinful church on a pilgrimage through history, holy but always in need of penance, reform and renewal.

The ordained and nonordained ministries of the future will be like the church itself: a pilgrim reality, on the way, always in process, ever subject to change, constantly adapting to new circumstances, new challenges and new opportunities.

We cannot really imagine what the church will be like in another 100 years, because we cannot really imagine what the world will be like then.

But whatever the changes, there will also be certain constants in the life of the church itself. The church will still be proclaiming the Gospel
of Jesus Christ and the promise of the reign of God’s justice and peace. The church will still be celebrating the Eucharist, the anticipation of the heavenly banquet to which all of us have been called. The church will still be renewing and reforming itself in order to project a clearer, more credible, more compelling sign of Christ’s abiding presence in, and abiding care for, the world. And the church will still be employing whatever resources it has to minister, like the servant Christ, to the poor, the troubled, the oppressed, the bereaved, the lost and all those in need.

In summary: If these six ecclesiological trends emerging from the council should continue to develop during this 21st century and the early decades of this new millennium, the church of the future will be a church more like the church of the first Christian millennium than the second.

First, it will be more conscious of itself as a sacrament of Christ and more conscious of its missionary obligation to practice the faith that it preaches.

Second, it will be, like the church of the first Christian millennium, a more democratic church, recognizing that the church always includes the hierarchy and other official leaders but is never coextensive with them. The church is the whole People of God.

Third, the church of the third Christian millennium will be more fully engaged in social ministry, conscious that the martyrs of El Salvador like Archbishop Oscar Romero, the four churchwomen, and the six Jesuits and their housekeeper and her daughter were not murdered because of their defense of papal authority and the hierarchical structure of the church, but for their courageous commitment to social justice and human rights. The faith that the church proclaims will be a “faith that does justice,” to use the words of the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus.

Fourth, the church of the third Christian millennium, like the church of the first Christian millennium, will be less centralized because it will be more sensitive and responsive to local needs, local cultures, local traditions and local charisms.
Fifth, the church of the third Christian millennium will be more ecumenical — still Catholic at its core, but more genuinely open and responsive to the presence and activity of God to be found outside the church, among people everywhere.

Sixth, and finally, the church of the Third Christian Millennium will be more aware of its own limitations, less prone to equate itself with the reign of God, and therefore, less inclined to march across the stage of history as if the church, not God, were the center and driving force of the mystery of salvation.

That future church is still in process. Like the reign of God, it is “already” but “not yet.” We are — all of us — an important and indispensable part of the “already.” Our hope is to see and experience what is “not yet.”

That hope is rooted in an unshakable faith in Christ, who is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8) and an unshakable confidence in the Holy Spirit, who makes “all things new” (Rev. 21:5).

© 2009 Richard P. McBrien. All rights reserved.

*Father Richard P. McBrien, STD, is the Crowley-O’Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Ind.*