

In this next installment of the unfulfilled promises of Vatican II, Edward Thompson discusses the role of bishops as written in council documents; ecumenism plans then and now; a very brief review of the conciliar work of Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI and the promising future of grass roots organizations like VOTF.

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## **The Promises of Vatican II, Unfulfilled Part II**

Even the bishops were promised more involvement in the running of the Church during Vatican II. *Lumen Gentium* said the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Pope and by the Bishops in communion with the Pope. Finally, for the first time in the history of the Church, it added "Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside its visible confines." (L.G.15) Clearly, the guests of the Council from Protestant denominations and the eastern orthodox Church were encouraged by this statement that suggested the potential for reconciliation.

So, do local Bishops today make decisions about the functioning of their Diocese without necessarily going to Rome for permission? Do Christian leaders feel the same welcome in the Catholic Church as the Council promised? I think the answer to both is a resounding "no". Today, all episcopal appointments in the local Church must be approved by Rome. Today, there are no fruitful discussions with our eastern orthodox brothers about ending the thousand year schism between east and west. The recent outreach to the Anglican Church seems to refute my contention about other Churches freely coming into the Catholic Church. But a closer review shows Pope Benedict's action tends to divide rather than unite. Anglicans who are in a communion of churches that accept homosexuality as a lifestyle are not invited, but only those who conform to the Catholic Church's teachings.

For the historians in *VOTF*, it is interesting to note that four future Popes participated in its opening session, Giovanni Battista Cardinal Montini, who succeeded Pope John as Paul VI, Bishop Albino Luciani, later becoming Pope John Paul I, Bishop Karol Wojtyła, the future Pope John Paul II, and Father Joseph Ratzinger, who is now our Pope Benedict XVI.

Pope Paul VI accepted many of the reforms started by Pope John and the Council, but he vacillated in other areas such as birth control, deciding to take the traditional view that all forms of artificial contraception are intrinsically evil. (*Humanae Vitae*, 1968) His decision was contrary to the recommendations of his advisers made up of clerical and lay leaders of the Church. We will never know about what Bishop Luciani, John Paul I, would have done to continue the reforms of the Second Vatican Council since he died suddenly only months into

his pontificate. We do know, however, about the very long reign of Pope John Paul II.

Seen as a great leader of the west, especially in regard to his staunch opposition to Communism, I believe John Paul II was responsible for many of the reversals of the promises of Vatican II. He limited the power of the bishops to make local decisions about the functioning of their dioceses. He refused to even examine the role of women in the Church. His pontificate was responsible for a return of Roman clericalism and triumphalism which was so often criticized by the Council.

Today, we have a continuation of many of the retrenchments wrought by John Paul II in the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI, formerly Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This includes an acceptance of the return in some areas of the Tridentine Mass, the continuation of Rome's overbearing decision-making of local churches, a refusal to discuss the possibility of optional celibacy of priests, and the approval for a Curial investigation of American nuns.

So what are we to make of all this? Happily, I think the conciliar movement goes on in grass roots organizations like the *Voice of the Faithful* despite Rome's reversals of the Councils' reforms. We began this journey in 2002 with the horror of the sex abuse crisis and the cover-up by bishops which allowed the abusers to continue hurting kids. But the sex abuse crisis is only a symptom of the larger problem. It is the inability of the hierarchy to relinquish its centralized power. It feeds on its obfuscations, its silence and its consequent disconnect with the people of God. The Second Vatican Council held hope for an end to this medieval attitude, but for the past thirty years, since JP II, that hope has been diminished. A top-down reform in keeping with council documents appears dead.

But a bottom-up approach to reform through the workings of VOTF and other organizations still has a chance of bringing the Church back to the renewal promised in 1965. We will always remember the words of *Lumen Gentium* about its promises to the laity. "...may every opportunity be given them (the laity) so that, according to their abilities and the needs of the times, they may zealously participate in the saving work of the Church." (LG33)

While some Catholics have decided to leave the Church rather than stay and witness the return of a pre-Vatican II church, we have decided to stay and fight for what the Council Fathers believed was the new way of Church. We believe in religious liberty, freedom of conscience, and the right of local churches to make its own decisions on episcopal selection. We want to serve by insisting that our baptism gives us the right to demand our true role in the functioning of the administration of the Church. Despite the ill-will of some who consider us dissidents, we struggle to fight on against the virtual Roman "Iron Curtain" which seemingly has descended on our already beleaguered Church.

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