

50th ANNIVERSARY OF ORDINATION

Fr. Bob French

Ordained May 1, 1963

50th Anniversary of Vatican Council II 1962 - 1965

Sacrosanctum Concilium promulgated Dec. 4, 1963

**REFLECTIONS TO SHARE
WITH GOOD FRIENDS
WHO HAVE HOPE**

Hope for the Future

***"I myself have no doubt that the council's finest hour is still to come,
that its seed will spring up and bear fruit."***

Cardinal Walter Kasper

An anniversary is the occasion to remember events from years now past, to celebrate the present with thanksgiving, and to look to the future with hope. So on this 50th anniversary of my priestly ordination and the 50th anniversary of Vatican Council II I remind myself and give thanks that I am a priest of Vatican Council II, a Council *of* the Church *about* the Church that I sometimes think is the best-kept secret in the Church. To me, it is certainly one of the greatest stories never told and I find myself at times both a promoter and a defender of Vatican II. My hope is that that will change in my lifetime or, more probably, shortly thereafter because history testifies that it takes one hundred years after the seed is planted for the fruits of an ecumenical council to blossom. I have no doubt that the Council's finest hour is still to come, that its seed will spring up and bear fruit. Perhaps the universal rejoicing at the election of Pope Francis I is the first of many signs that a new era is dawning. For me, Pope Francis I is certainly a sign of hope. Perhaps as John XXIII was to a time 50 years ago, so Francis I will be the manifestation of the Spirit in this present time.

Nonetheless, you can now see that the 50th anniversary of Vatican II and my 50th anniversary of ordination almost coincide. I was ordained on May 1, 1963. On Dec. 4, 1963 the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy and liturgical renewal was implemented in parishes. That council document did more than rearrange the furniture in the sanctuary and change language from Latin to English. It was a dramatic transformation in how we Catholics saw ourselves as worshippers. It

called for the full, active, and conscious participation within the community that together celebrates the eucharist. Each person had his or her own role to exercise in the liturgy, - the presider, the lectors, the song-leader, the Eucharistic ministers, and so forth. No longer were the laity to be mere spectators at "Father's mass" segregated by an altar rail. It is the gathered church that celebrates with one, the priest, presiding.

On Nov. 21, 1964 the Council document on the Church was promulgated. And the diagram of the church changed from the pyramid with the Pope on top and then the bishops and ordained priests in the middle and finally the laity on the bottom. Pay, pray, and obey was the mantra of that model. Now it is a circle embracing all of the People of God where everyone has dignity and rights in virtue of baptism. All of us began to move from a church that understood itself primarily as a hierarchial institution to a church understood as a communion of all he baptized in whom God is present and through whom God acts. The foundational sacrament of holiness is made clear; it is baptism. Marriage and Holy Orders specify how the primary vocational call of baptism will be answered. After May 1, 1963, imitating St. Augustine, I could say, "With you I am baptized; for you I am ordained." As the years have gone by I am each day more thankful for the gift of faith and for baptism into the faith community of church. I see holiness radiated in the lives of women and men, young and old in every parish I have served in. I remind myself that to serve such people as a priest is a gift from God.

But I did not go to bed one night formed in my understanding of church by the Baltimore Catechism and the Council of Trent only to wake up the next morning as a priest of Vatican II. There was a great - yet sometimes gradual - shift in my self-understanding as a Catholic and as a priest. I suggest that many of us, both clergy and laity, have to again understand what was felt and accepted for so very long in our rich yet tattered history: the pope, the bishop, the Vatican, the Roman Curia is not the same as the Catholic Church. Rubrics and rituals do not replace faith.

Fifty years of ordained ministry have taken me first to St. Bede's in Williamsburg, then to St. Luke's in McLean. From there I moved to Richmond as Director of the Office of Religious Education and then on to establish Ascension Parish in Va. Beach. After Ascension I had a sabbatical in the Holy Land and upon return went to St Therese in Chesapeake. My final parish assignment was to Immaculate Conception in Hampton and from there into retirement. Each of those parish communities had its own communal identity, its own history, its own needs and expectations, and its own problems. Each likewise had its own wealth of competent and dedicated lay leaders.

Every community I was privileged to serve in was filled with good faith-filled men and women. In the 60's and 70's both priests and people became comfortable understanding the church as "the people of God" and recognizing that everyone had a call to some form of ministry. Then my role as pastor was to invite, enable, facilitate, listen, and encourage men and women to engage in parish ministries and to start new ministries. The response of dedicated people was indeed overwhelming. And in several instances the parish discerned it important to invest in the education of fellow parishioners to the point that they would be sent off to get degrees in pastoral theology or religious education, or advanced formation in clinical pastoral care. And these people, once they achieved their degrees, returned to the parish and formed others in ministry. Leaders were recruited, volunteers were trained, and the parishes burst with the energy set loose by Vatican II.

Many wonderful things happened during the past fifty years in my own life and in the life of the church. And there were some bumps and bruises along the way. After all, Vatican II ended and my priestly ministry started in what might be rightly called the most tumultuous decade in American history where you had all the ingredients for immense change, much confusion, and unbridled idealism. But one result is, as I said, that I am a Vatican II priest. Throughout my latter years of studies and into the earlier decades of my priestly ministry I had the good fortune to have wise and good men as mentors and teachers and friends. Among them were Carroll Dozier, Gene Walsh, Ray Brown, Paul Cauwe, Dick McBrien, Gorman Sullivan, Carroll Stuhlmuehler, and Jim Laubaucher. They readied me to

embrace the *aggiornamento* of Vatican II and gave me a profound appreciation for the wisdom and vision of the council. And they imbued me with a lasting love for scriptures, for liturgy, for pastoral theology, for ecclesiology, and for history. They helped me to move from a church that understood itself primarily as a hierarchical institution into a church that understood itself as a communion of the People of God. I continue to be grateful for all those men did for me and for my brother priests.

I am also grateful for the associates who ministered with me in my various assignments. They were Mike McCarron, Bill Dale, Rich Mooney, Bob Perkins, Bob Cummins, and Danny Klem. With their different personalities and unique gifts, they all had the same "made by Vatican II" stamp on their priesthood. And like me they were imperfect. Yet our strengths and our weaknesses and our wounds defined our priesthood and the paschal mystery that we tried to proclaim.

And I dare not forget those who, though now deceased, played such an important part in the renewal of our diocesan presbyterate and whose wisdom and energy supported the rest of us: Walter Sullivan, Tom Quinlan, Frank Quinn, Mike Hanna, Bill Sullivan, and Art Conrad.

The first two decades of my priesthood were both exciting and challenging. In the earlier years it was not at all uncommon for 300 or more people to attend weekly classes at area adult ed centers. And parishes regularly had 40 to 50 parishioners attending classes on the parish level. Weekend liturgies were crowded, animated, and alive. Pastoral councils and finance committees were formed, DRE's were welcomed and the RCIA was revived. Ecumenism and collegiality became household words. Diocesan councils and committees readily provided support for many parish renewal projects. Shared authority, the role of the laity, the need for reform and renewal at both the diocesan and parish levels were common and open topics at practically every gathering of priests. And Catholics began singing! The magnitude of experiencing the Vatican II Church was so intense that you couldn't get it out of your system. But how silly it all would have been if the Holy Spirit was not somehow there with all of us.

I was a member of the Priests Personnel Committee for nine years. Back then we met with representatives of a parish to determine the needs and expectations of the parish community. This process was very time consuming, but it exposed me to different styles of ministry and different models of parishes. Priests bid on the parishes that were open for a new pastor. Then we interviewed the priest to ask how he saw his skills and talents in relation to the needs and expectations of a parish. Of course, every parish wanted the new pastor to be a perfect clone of Jesus! But seldom did the bishop reject any recommendation for a priest's assignment. It was not a perfect system and it was very time-consuming. But everyone felt they had been listened to, that their observations and insights were valuable. But things change as the years roll by.

All of this took place amidst the social turmoil of the 60's and the challenges of implementing the Vatican II renewal was fueled to a large extent by an idealism that marked the larger culture at the time. Looking back I see more clearly that the ministry of the church and my own ministry were always evolving because the world and society were constantly evolving. Yet in the midst of all of the social upheaval of the 60's and 70's the vision of Vatican Council II continued to inspire the People of God, including myself. And pastoral bishops, men who had served as pastors of parishes, were appointed to help us. Through friendly and respectful dialogue they indeed helped me and my confreres to see ourselves as ordained servants, to see collegiality as preferred, ecumenism as normative, and full, active, and conscious liturgical participation as expected.

We priests were no longer seen as a cultic functionaries or institutional managers, but as pastoral leaders who with our bishop encouraged and formed lay leadership and presided at the communal prayer of the church. Catholics, ordained and lay, as I said, felt they had gone to bed in the 16th century under an ecclesial monarchy and now were waking up in the 20th century ready to transform the modern world. It was an exciting and challenging time to be a parish priest. It was a time when folks would proudly say "I am a Catholic and a member of so-and-so parish." It was indeed a time of dramatic transformation. Those were years of great expectations, high energy and high hope.

Then under Pope John Paul II things began to change. In my opinion he was a man of great vision, but to me his vision seemed to be filtered almost exclusively through his own life experiences. Until he was elected pope his whole life had been spent in the persecuted church of Poland with its fortress mentality frozen in time. In his view it was a traditional Catholic devotional piety and an unyielding loyalty to church authority that allowed his beloved Polish church to survive in the face of Communist oppression. And he would prescribe the same medicine for the universal church. Pope John Paul II purged theological creativity and pastoral innovation, reasserted centralized control, and promoted a priesthood highlighted by pious devotion and Marian piety. So he enforced much of his own devotional piety on the church at large. And so the second Sunday of Easter becomes Divine Mercy Sunday! He also offered the universal church his personal and particular interpretation of Vatican Council II, and for many bishops, priests and laity, his interpretation won the day. This, I think, is especially evident among many of the more recently ordained. And John Paul II appointed as bishops men who are clerical, authoritarian, compliant, and in total agreement with his personal opinions. Institutional loyalty rather than pastoral experience and vision seemed to prevail. Listening and dialogue were not paramount on the pontifical and episcopal "to do" lists. The windows opened by Pope John XXIII and the Vatican II bishops began to close under Pope John Paul II.

Fr. Joseph Ratzinger, a.k.a. Pope Benedict XVI, was a theological *peritus* at Vatican Council II and then quite progressive. As I now reflect it seems to me that Pope Benedict and the Roman Curia retained or appointed by him were trying to shutter and latch even more tightly the windows thrown open by Vatican II. The Council that first brought so much hope to millions of Catholics and Protestants was first subjected to curial revision and now attempted reversal. It's as if the Council that birthed so much hope and energy in the church is sanctioned one day and sabotaged the next by official church leadership. "It was all a mistake" now say some voices in Rome as they attempt to reign in the impulses of Vatican II. Much of the enthusiastic hope which stirred in the days of the council and immediately thereafter has faded. Many seem to have forgotten how powerful it was. But how can one forget Pentecost?

Like everybody else I was surprised when Pope Benedict announced his retirement. But I was also relieved for him because it was painfully obvious that age and heavy responsibilities had taken their toll. Benedict XVI, Pope Emeritus, has freed the church from a major problem of having a senile or incapacitated pope in the future. His resignation says it's now OK for a pope to resign when he is no longer up to the task of papal ministry. I think the Pope Emeritus deserves our thanks for this precedent. And let's hope that his example becomes a path for future popes to follow when necessary.

The 34 years of John Paul II and Benedict XVI were an attempt to rein in the impulses of Vatican Council II. The first 15 post-conciliar years were alive with a rich, if at times messy and excessive, enthusiasm for renewal of the Church. What will happen to the Church after our new Pope Francis I sets his agenda remains to be seen. Either the embers of Vatican II will burst into a new flame, and the long dormant renewal will occur, or even more cold water will be thrown upon the heap of cooling ashes. I hope for the former!

Today I know that the morale of many priests of my vintage and the faith of many lay people who hold to the vision offered by Vatican Council II are sorely tested. This appears to be true not only in the United States but throughout Europe and Australia also. I and others discern a dismantling of the ecclesiology, pastoral vision, and liturgical renewal envisioned by Vatican II now applauded by many younger priests. The emphasis seems to be placed on a more transcendent church served by a more ritually oriented priesthood. And those in power or high office in the church seem to want to restore a more controllable institutional and hierarchical model of church through an increasingly centralized power structure embodied in a network of Vatican congregations. The imposition of the new Roman Missal, the permission for the Tridentine liturgy in every parish, the investigation of American women religious, the bishops' handling of the sex abuse scandal, the silencing of priests who dare to raise questions that invite serious and thoughtful debate, naming as bishops men who lack pastoral experience, and resurgent clericalism are all difficult to sync with the vision and spirit of the Vatican II church as I understand it. Many times I found it difficult to reconcile what I thought could be done with what was actually done or left undone.

The formation of lay leaders, parish adult ed offerings, challenging homilies, fully participative and joyful liturgies seem to have vanished into memory in many places as have tens of thousands of people who are now former Catholics. Rightly we celebrate the initiation of hundreds of new members at the Easter Vigil baptisms. But do we acknowledge or even notice the thousands who have walked away from the church? Do we miss them? Do we dare wonder if they have walked away to protect their faith? As I read the news, hundreds of parishes no longer have Sunday liturgy, many of our churches are still big but now empty, and our rituals, our clerical titles, and our cassocks are pompous in a changed and changing culture. Do we not need the *aggiornamento* of Vatican II now more than ever? I think we do. Let us hope.

Occasionally I chat with classmates now scattered throughout many dioceses. And I try to keep up with current thinking through reading and occasional participation in various regional convocations. One constant concern in all of the above is a return to clericalism among so many younger priests. It appears to me that some of these younger priests are trying to seek their identity in a resurgent clericalism and their security in legalism. It involves not only a fascination with cassocks and Latin and rubrics and a preference for antiquated devotions and a static rather than dynamic understanding of the eucharist. Their commitment to devotions is certainly recognized; their embrace of Vatican II ecclesiology is somewhat questionable. This resurgent clericalism also often involves a rather cavalier dismissal of the legitimate role of lay women and men. The formation of lay leaders, the facilitating of adult education in parishes, vibrant liturgies and challenging homilies appears to be unattractive to many younger priests. And then, of course, I join with many parishioners in recognizing the generosity of international priests who come to serve in our diocese. But with them I also recognize the difficulty and frustration that foreign cultural values and problems with the English language bring to both the international priests and the people they serve. Often good people ask me why they should go to church when they cannot understand the gospel, the homily, or the Eucharistic prayer.

Seminary professors have shared with me that the "restorationist" model of church that many of the younger priests embrace gives them a feeling of

belonging to something with very clear guidelines for living. It gives them a strong sense of personal security. That perhaps explains their almost obsessive rigidity with rubrics and their sometimes excessive attention to bell, book, and candle. In those they find a clear and strong authority structure which they trust absolutely as being of divine origin. Personal security, then, comes with fidelity to the institutional church structures, practices, and laws, and devotional practices which the late Cardinal Martini described just before he died as being at least 200 years out of date. Rabbi Abraham Heschel, an official observer at Vatican II, once wrote: *... when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past, when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion - its message becomes meaningless.* As I look back over the last two or three decades I see more and more wisdom in the words of Cardinal Martini and Rabbi Heschel. And I see a present glaring need for open dialogue among older and younger priests.

As the years went by times changed and the emphases in ministry changed. Our culture got entrapped by excessive individualism and consumerism. The demands on parishioners' time made it more difficult to attract volunteers. People were simply unable to get as involved as they would have liked. This situation put a greater emphasis on Sunday liturgy when the community gathered so the role of the greeter evolved because in a mobile society it was important that hospitality be extended. All were welcomed. The attention given to the preparation of decent homilies and good liturgical music was recognized and appreciated. And parishioners trusted the elected parish council to discern what was best for the overall community as it lived its mission. Hospitality, homilies, music, and leadership became higher priorities, and my pastoral ministry, like the ministry of many of my confreres, became more and more focused on the importance of the Sunday celebrations. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy from Vatican II and consequent documents on the liturgy became foundational as other ministries radically changed or ceased in a parish. I remain firmly convinced that if I as a priest do not do my best to help people experience a well-prepared and prayerful Sunday liturgy, I am whistling Dixie. But I don't hesitate to remind

the gathered community that they are not attending mass as benchwarmers. All of us together, the gathered church, celebrate the eucharist.

My fifty years of priesthood have been exciting, challenging, rewarding, and joy filled. Mistakes and misjudgments have been made, but, I pray, some good has also been done. Now in retirement I thank God that I don't have to get involved any more with the administration and management of a parish community nor respond to the mostly inane communications from the diocesan offices. More and more I am of the mind that any person, lay or ordained, who is hired for any position in the diocesan offices should be required as a condition of employment or appointment to undertake a 30 day retreat praying and reflecting on two conciliar documents, *The Church* and *The Church In the Modern World*. *The Constitution On the Sacred Liturgy* should also be prayerfully read.

My primary if not exclusive ministry now is to preside at the celebration of the Eucharist with different parish communities. And I don't think any retired priest can survive without celebrating Eucharist with a community. My personal and private life is very ordinary: a lot reading, a few select TV shows, prayer time, laundry, and cooking. Travel is still important to me because, as Mark Twain said, "it is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow mindedness, and it cannot be acquired by vegetating in one's little corner of the earth". My "bucket list" included travels to the great sites of Christianity and of Eastern and Western civilizations.

Christian hope has to be rooted in reality. Otherwise it is only wishful thinking standing on the delusion of fantasy. My hope for the Church and the full implementation of Vatican Council II rests on my firm belief that the Holy Spirit has not retired, and that once all the introductory and PR work is done with, Pope Francis I will again open the windows for a breath of fresh air, the breath of the Holy Spirit. Cardinal Joseph Suenens wrote: "I believe in the surprises of the Holy Spirit. John XXIII came as a surprise, and the council too. They were the last things we expected. Who would dare to say that the love and imagination of God were exhausted. To hope is a duty, not a luxury." Let us hope.