The eager expectation that greeted Pope John XXIII's announcement in January 1959 of a forthcoming General Council gradually waned afterwards, among both liberals and conservatives. The former, disappointed by the conservative contents of the conciliar documents, resorted to an amorphous "spirit of Vatican II" to further their program of a radical revision of Catholicism. They still do, as a recent (16 May 2005) article in the New Yorker illustrates: "This idea of a catalytic 'spirit of Vatican II' was embraced by liberals as a kind of license for new Catholic thought and practice."

Conservatives, on the other hand, were alarmed at the iconoclasm, both literal and figurative, that followed the Council in the rush for vernacular liturgies and up-to-date theology. That these attitudes have solidified rather than dissolved over the last forty years is apparent from the New Yorker article referred to above. In the secular media the same old ideas and, in Fathers Charles Curran and Richard McBrien, the same old proponents of them, still occupy center stage.

The Crisis of the Nineteen Fifties

Councils are called in times of crisis, and Vatican II was no exception. The crisis in 1958 was not a matter of faith or morals within the Church but, rather, threats to the human race itself. John XXIII specified them in Humanae salutis—the Apostolic Constitution of 25 December 1961 proclaiming the Council—as the danger of nuclear war and a dehumanization caused by materialistic atheism, materialistic capitalism, and widespread poverty.

The origin of these evils was secularization, the attempt to construct a society without God. By abandoning God's complete revelation in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, mankind had embraced chaos and meaninglessness. But could the Church bring to a desperate world the message of salvation? John XXIII was convinced that she could, for the Church was in fine fettle, never more vigorous:

"The Catholic Church presents itself to our eyes as clothed with a greatly changed and more perfect form: evidencing a firmer unity of structure, developed by the help of a richer doctrine and more beautifully resplendent with the brightness of sanctity, so that she stands forth completely prepared to fight the holy battles of the faith," (Humanae salutis).

Nor was the world in its sorry state averse to listening: "The Church has achieved so lofty a pinnacle of prestige that her solemn pronouncements are treated with the highest respect by all prudent men, who regard her as a spokesman and defender for morality and a vindicator of the rights and duties of individuals and of nations" (Humanae salutis).

Such was the purpose of Pope John's calling the Council. The barrier between the world and the Church was not, he sensed, based on suspicion or contempt but on ignorance. It would have been criminal to bypass the providential opportunity of speaking to a world ready as never before to listen to the Gospel. But one speaks in order to be understood, and modern man would
find simply incomprehensible the language of Catholic discourse, highly specialized, even
technical after centuries of scholastic polishing. The combination of these two requirements was
the source of John's famous call for aggiornamento ("updating"): "It is necessary for [the
Church] to keep up to date with the changing condition of this modern world... that the sacred
heritage of Christian truth be safeguarded and expounded with greater efficacy" (Questa festiva:
the task of Vatican II: "The deposit of faith, or truths which are contained in our time-honored
teaching, is one thing; the manner in which these truths are set forth (with their meaning
preserved intact) is something else." This purpose was not lost on Pope John Paul II who
identified it in his introduction to the Catholic Catechism in 1992: "The principal task entrusted
to the Council by Pope John XXIII was to guard and present better the precious deposit of
Christian doctrine in order to make it more accessible to the Christian faithful and to all people
of good will."

The Significance of the Council's Innovation

To understand the significance of Pope John's summoning a general council, one must
put aside the appropriation of the term aggiornamento by radical revisionists who used it to
question every aspect of Catholic life. It’s true meaning is to be found in a typical Catholic
confidence in the power of the Church to distinguish good from evil in any society it encounters,
and to honour the former as she rejects the latter. In doing so, she is continuing a practice that
goes back to apostolic times, when the Church accepted first gentile converts and then adopted
the languages and cultural elements of the Graeco-Roman Empire.

A famous instance occurred at the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) when the bishops
inserted into the creed what has been called the most controversial word of the fourth century:
homoousios in Greek, consubstantialis in Latin, rendered as "one in being" in our version of the
creed. Their use of the term was problematic for many traditional Christians because it was not
biblical. Still worse was its tainted origin: it had been employed by second-century Gnostic
heretics to describe bizarre elements of their cosmology. But the Fathers at Nicaea were
convinced that it was the best, even the only way to defend the biblical teaching of the full
divinity of Jesus against an insidious Arianism that reduced the doctrine to metaphor. No amount
of equivocation, however, could allow the Arians to evade the full import of the creed's
description of Jesus as "one in being with the Father."

Other councils of the early Church illustrate the same approach: the bishops were pastors,
innovators precisely in order to preserve intact the Catholic truth they had inherited from their
predecessors. The great Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) is another instance of what one might
call innovative traditionalism. Although the Council of Ephesus in 431 had forbidden the
introduction of any creed other than that of Nicaea, the bishops at Chalcedon promulgated both
another creed-the Niceno-Constantinopolitan-and a new definition of faith. And why? Because
without them the Church's trinitarian and, especially, Christological faith would have been
seriously threatened.

One more example of innovation must suffice: the famous Filioque added to the Creed by
the Western Church and still a bone of contention between Catholics and Orthodox. What we
know as the Nicene Creed states that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father and from the
Son (Filioque)," while the Orthodox, following the original wording, say he "proceeds from the Father." How could one branch of the Church alter the creed on its own? Saint Thomas Aquinas answers: "Every council has set down some creed with a view to condemning a particular error. Later councils, therefore, do not formulate a creed differing from one more ancient, but, against emerging heresies, make explicit by added phrases what was implicit in the earlier creed" (Summa theologiae 1.36.2).

The Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council is another instance of the Church's responding to man's needs in a new way that honors her tradition. This willingness to engage human culture in every age, characteristically Catholic as opposed to Orthodox or Protestant, I have described in an earlier issue of Catholic Insight: "The Differences between Catholics and Orthodox" (Sept., 2001). This engagement provides the best way to comprehend the achievement of the Council; there is a legitimate way to speak of "the spirit of Vatican II." Like Saint Augustine's critical use of Plato, or Saint Thomas Aquinas's of Aristotle, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council incorporated modern philosophical and scientific systems into the functioning of the Council and its documents. The true "spirit of Vatican II," therefore, is a confident discrimination of modern achievements in politics, science, thought, and culture. Benedict XVI, e.g., as Cardinal Ratzinger, in his Principles of Catholic Theology (p. 334) noted one controversial influence on the Council: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (d. 1955). His Milieu divin was once described by the Reformed theologian Karl Barth as "a giant Gnostic snake." More importantly, the Council drew also upon the thought of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (d. 1938), whose theory of phenomenology has been utilized by, among others, Saint Edith Stein and Pope John Paul II.

Teilhard's Optimism

Teilhard's optimistic blend of Christianity and science is particularly apparent in the conciliar Constitution Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World): "Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in the hearts [of the followers of Christ]." Despite an obvious weakness in his theology of evolution—it links spiritual progress so closely to material and intellectual evolution that it virtually ignores sin and its consequences and so abandons the historical Jesus for a cosmic Christ that can seem more of a force than a person—Teilhard was convinced that history has a direction and that the salvation accomplished by Jesus leads ultimately to the "new heaven and the new earth" of the Book of Revelation. His basic principle was the harmony of all truth; scientific knowledge and authentic religion can never be in conflict. Thus, in Gaudium et Spes the optimism of Pope John is revealed in the conviction that there can be a fruitful dialogue between the Church and "the world," meaning here the scientific, technological and political components of modern society.

Fourth Stage of Inculturation

While there may be an almost naïve openness to secular systems, the document emphasizes the centrality of Jesus Christ in man's noblest endeavors: "In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear" (no. 22); "the Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and civilization, the center of mankind, the joy of all hearts, and the fulfillment of all aspirations" (no.45). With this document the Church entered the modern world, in the conviction that Pius IX's condemnation of "progress, liberalism and modern civilization" in the Syllabus of Errors, necessary, perhaps, in
1864, would not be beneficial for either the world or the Church a century later. As I indicated in my article "The Differences between Catholics and Orthodox," Vatican II inaugurated the fourth stage of inculturation for the Church, after the biblical, the patristic, and the mediaeval. But, just as Gaudium et Spes must be read in its entirety, so that document must be read in the context of Vatican II's other three Constitutions: Sacrosanctum Concilium (on the liturgy), Lumen gentium (on the Church), and Dei Verbum (on Scripture). Only then will a dialogue with "the world" avoid compromise.

**Edmund Husserl**

The phenomenology of Edmund Husserl had a far greater impact on the Council than Teilhard de Chardin. According to John F. Kobler, C.P., Husserl's phenomenology affected not only the conciliar documents but also the functioning of the Council itself. Father Kobler, the author of two books and scores of articles on this topic, claims that John XXIII's desire to make the Church more effective in proclaiming Jesus Christ to the world was accomplished by employing the principles of phenomenology. Two of them have been identified by Father Kobler in an article published in the December, 1988 issue of the *Canadian Catholic Review*. The first is "the outwards/inwards distinction," referring to "the way ideas take place within our consciousness." The second is to view man "in terms of his concrete relationships." The emphasis is on experience, which at the Council was the concrete realization of what many knew theoretically, that the Church was universal. Benedict XVI captured the feelings of the bishops and their retinues as they gathered at the Vatican in 1962:

"The Council is a Pentecost-that was a thought that corresponded to our own experiences at that time; . . . it reflected what we experienced on our arrival in the city of the Council: meetings with bishops of all countries, all tongues, far beyond what Luke [in Acts 2] could have imagined and, thus, a lived experience of real Catholicity with its Pentecostal hope."

*Principles of Catholic Theology*, p. 367.

It was this transforming experience, rooted in Jesus Christ and its continuing in the Church, that the Council wanted to bring to a wounded world. That events within and outside of the Church to a large extent frustrated the work of the Council does not invalidate its achievement, for without it Pope John Paul II would not have been elected, much less almost single-handedly made the experience and the documents of Vatican II-as old as Christianity itself and yet new-available to the Church and to the world. History may well recognize that in this providential pontificate Vatican II, like Trent and Nicaea, succeeded in its great work.

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