

# The Church on the eve of Vatican II

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**W**HY DID THE SECOND Vatican Council take place? Without an answer to this question—asked too infrequently, I might add, without some grasp of the general theological climate and religious culture of the “average” Catholic in the years before Vatican II (at least in Europe and the Americas), it is difficult to understand the documents of the Council.

At first glance, an innocent bystander of that time would certainly have judged that the Catholic Church was in good shape. In terms of structure, the occupants of the various offices in the Church knew their place well; the levels of authority and the responses that authority required were clear-cut. Many parishes boasted a fervent devotional life and the percentage of those practising their faith—judged mainly by attendance at Sunday Mass—was high. Vocations to the ministerial priesthood and religious life were numerous. Many dioceses had developed effective charitable organizations to help the material and spiritual poor. Catholic publications annually informed their readers of the number of “conversions” to the Church. Missionary activity remained robust: for example, in the early 1960s, Canadian dioceses and religious communities responded generously to Pope John XXIII’s request to send missionaries to Central and South America.

Catholic identity was deeply rooted in individuals and at every level of Church life. If Catholics did not always practise what was

preached to them, they most always knew how they were *supposed* to live out that identity: mainly, this consisted of unquestioned obedience to Church teaching—on every level—regarding faith and morals; Mass attendance on Sundays and the practice of certain devotional exercises; not eating meat on Fridays; fasting at appointed times; not being permitted to divorce and clear rules regarding sexual conduct

about it. Two major factors always determine the ethos of the Church at a given time, factors so intertwined that it can often be difficult to differentiate between them. The first is the manner in which the Church functions institutionally and pastorally; the second is the way the Church sees its relationship to the world. The Church became increasingly centralized in the modern world—especially from the time

of the First Vatican Council to the middle of the twentieth century. To state that Bishops in their dioceses were considered as branch managers of a company with its headquarters in Rome is undoubtedly an exaggeration. The fact remains that such a comparison points to an actual state of affairs that at least suggested a mindset of that sort; that there was a theology at hand to bolster such a state of affairs made it all the more feasible. The over-centralization of any institution, however, is never uniquely in view of effective internal administration.



**THE OVER-CENTRALIZATION OF ANY INSTITUTION is also in view of protecting and furthering its identity and goals in the face of those “outside” who may be perceived as competitors or even enemies in relationship to those goals and that identity.**

(one of my theology professors in the late 1950s told us the Church would never change its rules regarding artificial birth control because then it would be impossible to tell the difference between Catholics and Protestants!). To deny that this emphasis on Catholic identity fostered heroic Christian discipleship for many people would be to paint a caricatural portrait of the pre-Vatican II Church.

Yet something was seriously wrong and it took a Pope with the ecclesial experience, personality and holiness of a Blessed John XXIII to perceive the problem and do something

It is also in view of protecting and furthering its identity and goals in the face of those “outside” who may be perceived as competitors or even enemies in relationship to those goals and that identity. In terms of the pre-Vatican II Church, that “outside” was “the modern world.” That is why those who characterize that Church not only as a “pyramid” (in terms of its structures) but as a “fortress” (in terms of protecting its members from the modern world) are not wrong in their evaluation of major features of the pre-Vatican II Church. Another important aspect of this ethos must be mentioned: most



POPE PIUS XII PROMOTED THE NEED FOR RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH'S LITURGICAL LIFE.

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Catholics did not ask whether those emphases of the Church between Vatican Council I and the late 1950s had ever been different.

The Church, it is true, had good reasons to be leery of the modern world. That real historical forces did indeed threaten the Church from the late eighteenth century on cannot be treated in these pages. The movement to modernity was, nevertheless, far from entirely negative; despite this fact, the chasm between the Church and the modern world had, by the early twentieth century, seemed to have become almost unbridgeable. Nothing exemplifies this state of affairs better than the Modernist crisis. Pope Pius X claimed that Modernism was “the synthesis of all heresies” and syntheses are, by their very nature, difficult to condense. A “modernist,” in the large sense of the word, could be any thinking Catholic interested in the relationship between the Christian faith and modern science and philosophy, historical studies and so on. An “extreme,” unorthodox modernist in the stricter sense—generally speaking—believed that the doctrines, structures and worship of the Church were mere expressions of a diffused religious “sentiment” that could change according to diverse cultures, historical events and subjective thinking and taste(s). In this sense modernism is not far from the “relativism” of which we are so frequently warned well into the twenty-first century. The official Church did everything it could to stamp out Modernism, often with the most questionable means. This crusade was instrumental in deepening the centralization, legalism and fear of “modern” ideas in the Church right up to—and even during—Vatican II.

In the meantime, the world was changing rapidly even if the Church was not. The world had experienced two world wars along with the later emergence of a cold war, all fuelled by ideologies that turned the twentieth century into one of the cruellest ever. By mid-century, multiple countries had shed their colonial status and gained independence; this, along with scientific advances in so many areas (especially the “information explosion”), opened people’s eyes to a wider world.

Pope Pius XII was instrumental in budgeting the Church into becoming more aware of its more authentic nature. In three encyclicals, he promoted: 1) the validity of modern historical methods in interpreting Scripture (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*); 2) a more spiritual vision of the Church (*Mystici Corporis*); and 3) the need for renewal of the Church’s liturgical life (*Mediator Dei*). Thanks to these encyclicals and other factors, the 1950s witnessed new vitality in several areas: for the first time, two important international congresses were held—on the laity and the liturgy; in many countries, the Church was becoming more aware of its responsibilities in social action. At the same time—earlier, in fact—theologians, liturgists and biblical scholars were working towards a vision of the Church more sensitive both to its origins and its pre-nineteenth century tradition with a less fearful attitude towards the modern world. They were convinced that Catholics suffered from extrinsicism—a state of affairs where their faith was overly determined by truths and laws that came to them from “above” and “outside”; for them, such a state of affairs was necessarily accompanied

by an individualistic and “sacristy” type of Catholicism unaware of its mission to the increasingly paganised world surrounding it (and ill-equipped to have all that much influence on it). Returning to the sources of the faith—especially Scripture, the Fathers of the Church and the liturgy—these thinkers hoped to expose Catholics to a vision of their faith that would be more easily interiorized and so integrated into their lives. The neo-scholasticism taught in seminaries, which trickled down into the pastoral life of the Church, might have staved off somewhat the perils of Modernism but it had also produced a laity ignorant of the richness of its faith, passive before the glory of its liturgy, frequently nourished by devotions based more on revelations than Revelation, fearful of the perils represented by other Christian Churches and insufficiently attuned to the Good News that they were, by their baptism, commissioned to share with the world. This negative picture in no way takes away from the virtues of the pre-Vatican II Church mentioned earlier in this article. The fact remains that the Church was ready for a shift in identity.

A “shift” does not mean a rupture but it can mean a renewal and even a “reform” (a vocabulary Pope Benedict XVI is not afraid to use). The pre-Vatican theologians responsible for most of the content in the conciliar documents were acutely aware of the need for a renewed faith—more Christocentric and, therefore, more Trinitarian, both more personal and communal in nature, and more empathetic to and responsible for the “other” (a renewed mission). Every document of Vatican II resonates with this dual intentionality. John XXIII might not have used this exact language in convoking the Council but it certainly represents his intention in doing so. Those nostalgic for the pre-Vatican II Church—which they usually do not know—are most often types who would be the first to resist if not revolt against its restraints. The present tempest in a teapot over the “spirit” of Vatican II versus “what its documents really say” is mysterious to the extreme. Church documents are not all that different from Scripture, at least in the sense that one must not separate the letter from the Spirit. To interpret the documents of Vatican II, while attempting to divorce their meaning from their spirit, is representative of a very novel non-Catholic hermeneutic. The truly important issue, however, is whether this post-Vatican II Church—at every level—believes firmly in the purpose and challenge its documents and their spirit place before us in the opening decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. †