

Vatican II

Continued from page 1

One of Father Norris' parishioners certainly does not hanker for the pre-conciliar past of the church. Fred J. Rodems, chairman of Assumption's parish council, commented that while he was growing up in the Diocese of Buffalo he felt that running the church was the duty of the clergy and the hierarchy.

"In my church, I kind of felt I was going to be totally dominated by my pastor and the Vatican," Rodems said. Catholicism for Rodems once was "social" consisting of helping his parish run its bingo games and put on its dinners.

But, following Vatican II, Rodems took seriously its call for lay participation in the church's ministry. "My wife and I are active in pre-Cana," Rodems said of the discernment program for engaged couples. "(Before Vatican II, we) wouldn't have considered that we should take time out three times a year, and help the young couples out and lay our views on them."

Making lay people feel more a part of the church's life in general was one of the most important, if not the chief aim of the Second Vatican Council. But most observers agree that the initial paths to church reform were blazed mostly by the church's religious orders.

Called to re-adopt the original vision of their founders, religious orders changed everything from the way their members dressed to how they were assigned to various ministries. Interestingly, Sister Kathleen Milliken, RSM, assistant to the superior general of the Sisters of Mercy, asserted that the most obvious change to the faithful — that of sisters' habits — was actually one in tune with the spirit of many of the orders' founders.

"Most religious orders ... wore the peasant dress of the day," when they were founded, Sister Milliken noted. Hence, allowing religious to dress in a "modern" manner following Vatican II was actually a return to the ideal that religious would share the life of the people they serve, she noted.

the Gospel, it nonetheless rejected the imposition of Western culture on non-Western people in the name of the Gospel.

• **Church and World** — By far the longest, and easily one of the most important, most remembered and most quoted documents of Vatican II was "Gaudium et Spes," the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

With its opening words it definitively reversed a centuries-old "fortress" mentality of Catholic separation from, almost disdain for, the world:

"The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts ... This community (of the church) realizes that it is truly and intimately linked with mankind and its history."

Just the bare mention of all topics treated by the 23,000-word document would form a lengthy list.

Some of the issues for which it is a major resource of church teaching are: human dignity, freedom, person, community, social justice, sin, death, technological advance and rapid social change, marriage, conjugal love, family life and responsibilities, culture, education, economic activity, work, leisure, stewardship, private property, political participation, church and state, citizenship, government, international relations, war, peace, the arms race, development of poorer nations, international organizations and law in a new world order, population, dialogue as a means of conflict resolution.

It was, in short, a general framework or overview document for Catholic social teaching.

The reference in the document's opening sentence to "especially those who are poor" was the modern starting point, though it clearly draws on scriptural themes, of what has come to be called the church's "preferential option for the poor."

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EDITORS' NOTE: This story contains reporting by Jerry Filteau of Catholic News Service with additional information by Rob Cullivan.

Both religious orders and diocesan priests enjoyed another new freedom that grew out of Vatican II — that of being able to have a say in where they were assigned.

To a great extent prior to Vatican II, priests and religious had to go where they were sent. Sister Milliken remembered anxiously awaiting her latest assignment as it was announced on a yearly basis. And Bishop Matthew H. Clark recalled a similar subjection to the will of his superiors.

"When I was a young priest, we'd receive a letter and you read it and it said, 'You will be in such and such a diocese on Saturday and hear confessions,'" Bishop Clark said. He added that such an assignment would be impossible in today's church, where priests often spend weeks and months with their superiors in consultation before they are assigned anywhere.

Just as the council changed the relationship between bishops and their priests, Vatican II altered how the bishops related to the Vatican. The council called for the formation of bishops' conferences, a concept realized in the United States with the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, which replaced the old National Catholic Welfare Conference.

Prior to Vatican II, the NCWC "was really seen by the Vatican as a sort of rival council," Bishop Clark said. He added that bishops' conferences today are seen as a sign of the church's "collegial" nature — a nature grounded in the fact that the church, since its beginnings, has been spread throughout the world.

Sometimes referred to as "the council of the bishops," Vatican II produced a wealth of ideas whose implementation depended greatly on the willingness of diocesan bishops to explain and promote them. The council had reaffirmed the authority of the bishops as leaders of the church in conjunction with the pope, and the U.S. bishops took their co-authoritative role seriously when they returned home from Rome.

Auxiliary Bishop Dennis W. Hickey served as vicar general under the late Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, the first Rochester bishop to have a chance to take a crack at making Vatican II's concepts a reality.

"When he came here, he carried the council documents in a small volume with him all the time," Bishop Hickey recalled of Bishop Sheen, who served as head of the diocese from 1966-69. The former vicar general remarked that Bishop Sheen was not as interested in the council's liturgical reforms as he was in its emphasis on ecumenism and interfaith relations.

"The Jews thought he was the greatest thing in the world," Bishop Hickey said, recalling the late bishop's address to the Rochester Jewish Community Council at Brighton's Temple B'rith Kodesh in 1967. "The place was packed!" Bishop Hickey said.

The work of Bishop Sheen and other ecumenists has borne fruit in the ongoing dialogue between Christians and Jews, and Catholics and Protestants in the diocese. Today, the diocese boasts a Department of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, directed by Margery S. Nurnberg, who credits Vatican II with opening up new lines of communication between people of all faiths.

"One of the best things that has happened is that we've become co-creators of solutions," Nurnberg said of Catholics and people of other faiths. In particular, she said, relationships have greatly improved between Catholics and Jews — a development directly related to the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* or "The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions."

Nurnberg illustrated her point by noting that priests in their Lenten or Advent homilies will now stress Christ's Jewish identity. "We also (inform) people during Advent and Lenten times that Christ was Jewish, and frequently, Christ has not been known or presented as a Jew," she stated.

Bishop Sheen's successor, Bishop Joseph L. Hogan, participated in the establishment of Genesee Ecumenical Ministries, an inter-denominational organization that furthered the ecumenical ideas advanced by Vatican II.

Bishop Hogan emphasized that he saw the council's statements as something the church had to pay more than lip service.

"My overall purpose was to make the documents a living reality in the diocese," he said. "Documents are worthless if they're just allowed to collect dust and not do anything."

"In 25 years," Bishop Hogan concluded, "I think that more has happened by way of fulfillment of the decrees of the council than we've ever had in the life of the church."



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Declaration on Religious Freedom, entitled

"Dignitatis Humanae." The declaration was the

crowning achievement of one of America's greatest

theologians, Jesuit Father John Courtney Murray.

"The human person has a right to religious

freedom ... The right to religious freedom has its

foundation in the very dignity of the human person,

as this dignity is known through the revealed word

of God and by reason itself," the document

declared.

"Constitutional limits should be set to the powers

of government (on matters of religion) ... The truth

cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own

truth," not by outside coercion, it said.

• **Priests** — With its Decree on the Ministry and

Life of Priests, Vatican II tried to set in place a

renewal of Catholic priests to match the renewal

the council sought throughout the church.

The decree — "Presbyterorum Ordinis" — reaf-

firming priestly celibacy in the Western church —

even in its early versions, before Pope Paul VI said

that was not an open issue for council debate.

Preaching the Gospel and presiding over the

Eucharist were put forth as the central elements of

priestly ministry.

In the decree's vision, the priest is a co-worker of

the bishop in building up God's people on earth; he

is drawn from the community, yet set apart from

the community; he is both leader and "brother" of

those he is called to serve; he calls other Christians

to fulfill their ministries and leads them in doing so.

• **Missionary Activity** — Preaching the Gospel

to those who have not heard it is "the greatest and

holiest work of the church," said Vatican II's

Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church,

entitled "Ad Gentes."

"Since the whole church is missionary, and the

work of evangelization is a basic duty of the people