

Council's reforms still face opposition

For each of the past three summers I have devoted a series of columns to single themes: key saints in the summer liturgical calendar, the sacraments and the virtues.

This year's series, beginning next week, will focus on the Second Vatican Council's teachings on the church: its nature, its mission, its ministries, its structures, its relationship with other churches and religions, and its relationship with the world at large. (The series will be interrupted in early September for my annual Labor Day column on the social teachings of the church.)

Unfortunately, the Second Vatican Council and the pre-Vatican II church that it renewed and reformed are dead letters for many Catholics. Catholics under the age of 33 weren't even born when the council adjourned in December 1965, and they experienced nothing of the pre-Vatican II church that shaped and nurtured millions of today's over-50 Catholics, including their grandparents and many of their parents.

Those Catholics who are now 50 or thereabouts do have some memory of the church of the 1950s, but they have little or no meaningful memory of the council itself unless it had been brought vividly to life for them in their youth by extraordinary teachers in their Catholic schools, or in their parish religious education programs, or by individual priests, sisters and lay people.



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

But it's not only a problem of fading or nonexistent memories. Only a few years after the council's adjournment, a widely publicized survey conducted in a large Eastern diocese disclosed that 43 percent of the Catholics in that heavily Catholic region of the country had never even heard of Vatican II.

Compounding that problem today is the tiny, but highly vocal and powerfully connected minority of Catholics who seem to be doing everything they can to erase the memory of the council or to reinvent it through a cynical manipulation of its history. They carry on their negative "apostolate" through a well-funded combination of newspapers, magazines, newsletters, publishing houses, privately endowed centers and institutes, and the Eternal Word Television Network founded in 1981 by Mother Angelica, all with the crucial support of high-ranking Vatican officials and various influential cardinals and bishops at

home.

With the close of the current pontificate, the leading figures in this alliance will probably lose their favored status (and the direct access it brings) in the Vatican and in certain archdiocesan offices, just as Jerry Falwell and other Protestant political activists lost theirs once Ronald Reagan left the White House in January 1989. The effect of their efforts, however, will be felt for many years to come — both in the vast numbers of talented people and promising pastoral initiatives they successfully drove from the field of Catholic ministerial activity, and in the kinds of appointments to, or promotions within, the hierarchy they successfully engineered or influenced.

Which is not to say that the Second Vatican Council has failed to make a profound impact on the life of the Catholic Church over the past three decades, or that the forces now lined up against it are prevailing.

Nowhere is that impact more extensively or intensively felt than in the renewed liturgy, even where that liturgy is not celebrated in the most effective fashion. Consider the following by way of example:

1. The Mass is now celebrated in the vernacular rather than in Latin. The people understand what is being said by the priest. They do not have to use a missal to follow along, as if attending an opera,

nor need they distract themselves with the recitation of private prayers (including the rosary), the reading of the parish bulletin, or just plain daydreaming.

2. The congregation is now active rather than passive. The notion of merely "attending" or "hearing" Mass is obsolete. The people participate in the celebration by giving responses to the prayers offered by the priest, as well as by singing. Individual lay members of the congregation also proclaim the day's scriptural readings from a lectern in the sanctuary, and others assist in the distribution of Communion.

3. The majority of the congregation, no matter how late in the morning the Mass is celebrated, receives Communion and without having gone to confession the day or even the month before. In the pre-Vatican II church, many Catholics believed that the effects of their last confession somehow "wore off" after a certain number of weeks, even if they had committed no mortal sin in the meantime. They would not receive Communion again until they had re-energized their "spiritual batteries" in the confessional.

Vatican II's greatest impact on the church has been through the liturgy. And that is why the fiercest opposition to the council is always focused there.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

'Personality' helps to make Mass meaningful

Have you ever wondered why the person next to you at Mass comes to church and why neighbors you know to be Catholic do not?

Jeff Rexhausen, a researcher for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, posed this question to focus groups across the United States. He learned that four key factors are responsible for Mass attendance.

First, external factors may prompt people to attend Mass, including a sense of obligation, a desire to keep the family unified, a wish to know more about Catholicism and the presence of priests who are welcoming, nonjudgmental and able to disclose something of themselves.

It appears from that alone that people realize the importance of the Mass in their lives. Furthermore, Rexhausen found that they have a sense of guilt when they miss Mass.

Rexhausen's list of factors shows that many families follow the Christophers' principle: A family that prays together, stays together. Interestingly, it can be seen that the Mass is a cherished tradition about which people want to know



the human side

By FATHER EUGENE HENRICK

more. Finally, Rexhausen appears to verify studies that have shown that warm, sympathetic, outgoing priests and higher Mass attendance go hand in hand.

Liturgical factors also draw people to church: good homilies, beautiful music, Communion, baptisms and confirmations within the context of Mass, and the sacred rituals.

A third reason people come to church is because they want to experience God more closely. People have a desire to enter the holy of holies and to listen, talk with and be united with God.

The fourth factor Rexhausen identified is the need to belong to a church community in order to be connected with friends.

If we were to point to one dominant theme of all these factors, I would say it is personality — the attraction of people with warm, outgoing, enthusiastic, caring and spiritual dispositions.

Starting with priests, people love those who are true elders and who understand the sufferings others experience. If priests are sympathetic and empathetic, people will seek out their Masses.

If priests can give a homily that speaks to people on their own level while also lifting them to God's level, all the better. And if priests not only are blessed with a warm smile, but are aware of the presence of single adults, divorced people, the separated and widowed as well as of families, they are a blessing.

As Rexhausen's study demonstrates, it is not only the priest with a good personality who draws people to Mass.

The community's other liturgical planners and leaders also play a major role in this task. They set the tone of the Mass with music, the way the Scriptures are read and the reverence with which they distribute the Eucharist. If all this is done with personality, i.e., with enthusiasm, care, respect and reflection, these liturgical leaders magnify the beauty of the Mass.

In addition, the "personality" of the people — of the whole community that gathers — is important. It is one thing to park the car and rush into church, and yet another to take time to greet others as you enter.

When people sing enthusiastically and pray attentively and in unison, when they approach the liturgy with care for others and reverence for the divine, they help to make God's presence felt.

Why do you come to Mass? I'm willing to bet that one reason is because of the "personality" surrounding it.

Father Henrick is director of diocesan relations at the Catholic University of America.

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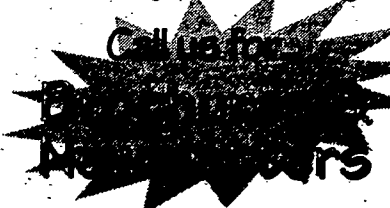
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